

A Minstrel Book



Mary Jane Warmington

Bought for Gold



Once she had swirled to the sensuous rhythms
of the dance, her hair gleaming in the flames
of the camp fire. A thief, a vagabond,
but free.

Now Jasmine was a captive, bought for gold
by the powerful Laird of Glenlacie. He needed
a companion to travel in disguise with him
and help rescue the woman he loved from
revolution-torn France. Jasmine learned to
cheat, lie and bribe her way through danger
at his side. She also learned to fight the
shameful desire that he aroused in her—until
she was faced with an impossible choice, to
sell herself, or see her master die.

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Mary Jane Warmington

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CHAPTER ONE

The day had grown hot and sultry and the dust flew around Jasmine Legh's feet as she whirled wildly in a gypsy dance. She was dancing for Miall Birch and trying to show him that her young body was now becoming well formed and that soon she would be ripe for marriage. Her foster parents, Rima and Judd Legh, were doing their best to keep her young and appealing in order to draw the crowds at Appleby Fair, but she was near sixteen years of age and she wanted Miall more than she had ever wanted anything in her life.

This year Miall was giving her the sort of looks which told her that he had noticed her and liked what he saw. This year his eyes promised that he would wed her if the marriage could be arranged with satisfaction to both families, and Jasmine wanted him to see that she was ready for him, and not so young and childlike as Judd would have others believe.

Rima accompanied Jasmine on the tambourine at a fast vibrating tempo whilst Judd mingled with the crowds which had gathered on the hillside overlooking the town, his cap held out for money. Jasmine's colourful costume blazed in the brightness of the hot June sunshine, and sweat made damp patches on her back. She had persuaded Rima to drop the neckline of her dress now that

her breasts were beginning to form and she had practised more voluptuous movements in the privacy of the verdo whilst Judd was out drinking and Rima gossiping with other gypsy women. Now she twisted and turned, her eyes searching the crowd for Miall's dark hair and flashing black eyes.

Two years before, Jasmine's courses had come upon her, and she had noticed Miall for the first time when the gypsies had gathered at Appleby. The Birches were horse dealers and Miall's arms had been strong and brown in the sunshine as he ran the horses up and down to show off their finer points to would-be purchasers. Jasmine had thought she had never seen anyone so young and handsome and had told Judd, in one of his softened moments, that she would fain wed with Miall.

'You're too young,' he told her. 'You're only fit for begging and dancing. You're not fit to be the wife o' a Birch.'

'You don't want me to marry,' Jasmine flashed. 'You just want me to beg for you'—and received a ringing slap on her ear.

'You do as you're told, girl,' said Judd. 'I'll see the Birches, but don't ye set your heart on Miall. He's a fine strong man, and older than ye.'

Jasmine had bemoaned her child's body, but this year she had grown apace, so that Rima had to make her a new costume, and she had combed her tangled dark chestnut curls until they flowed like a shining river down her back. Unlike the other gypsies whose eyes were black as coals, Jasmine's were as green as the water flowing from a mountain stream.

Miall was leaning up against a wall, a cloth cap covering his dark hair and his eyes lazily appraising her as Jasmine pirouetted in front of him. But even as she looked at

Miall, her eyes were drawn further back to a tall dark man who had come to join the watching throng. He was staring at her so compellingly that Jasmine almost missed a beat of the tambourine. She twisted away to dance in front of the other watchers, and saw that he was casually walking round, then pausing to gaze at her again. He was a gentleman, judging by his dress and bearing, and was accompanied by a servant. He was as dark as Miall, but there was a strange brooding look about him which caused her heart to lurch in panic.

Jasmine tried to ignore him, though she was now constantly aware of his tall dark figure towering over the other onlookers. Even Miall looked like a boy beside him. Jasmine deliberately turned back to Miall but he had gone and her heart twisted with disappointment. So she was still too much of a child to hold him!

Thankfully she heard the tempo of Rima's tambourine slowing and the dance ended in a flurry of her skirts. The crowds began to melt away as Judd pushed the cap under their noses, then the tall stranger walked forward and dropped a gold piece into it, and Judd seized upon the coin as he followed Rima and Jasmine into the verdo.

The girl was now bathed in perspiration, and she wiped herself down with a damp cloth after Rima had removed her scarlet and gold dancing dress. She was disappointed that Miall had not waited to speak with her, but he *had* watched and his eyes had gleamed with interest. Surely she had not misunderstood the message which flashed between them.

Rima served out a bite of food and a cool, refreshing drink made from herbs designed to keep the devils from attacking their bodies and causing illness. In the morning they would pack up their belongings and follow the road towards Keswick. The Fair was over for yet another year.

Ever since a Charter had been signed by King James II in 1685 to the Mayor, Aldermen and Capital Burgesses of Appleby, granting the Fair, the gypsy families had been coming here from all over the country, and the last evening was one of great celebration. Judd had always insisted that Rima remain in the verdo with Jasmine because of the fights which often broke out after the gypsies were well gone in drink, but this year Jasmine's lower lip jutted ominously. Other girls of her age were granted more freedom. How could a gypsy girl make a good marriage into another gypsy family if she were kept under lock and key?

'Can I go out this evening?' she asked her foster-father. Perhaps Miall would be watching for her if she wandered abroad when the air grew cooler.

Judd was a small, grim-faced man whose features still bore traces of his far-distant ancestors who had come out of India hundreds of years before to travel across Europe and into the British Isles.

'Can't I go?' Jasmine repeated, and after great deliberation he nodded.

'Aye, ye can go, and welcome, if ye earn yoursel' your dowry.'

'My dowry!'

'Aye, the Birches are not against ye, but there's time enough for any arrangements to be made. You're still too young to be wed.'

'I'm a woman,' she insisted.

'Hold your tongue. You're too quick-mouthed for a woman. But if ye earn us a bit o' gold before the night is through then I might look more kindly on where your fancy pleases.'

'My feet hurt,' Jasmine complained. She had danced herself into exhaustion that day.

'Not dancing,' said Judd. 'Just a bit o' helping yoursel'. That dark stranger who watched ye at the dance is staying at the Crown Inn. Put on your brown dress, girl, and slip in. Ye can soon find his room if you're clever as I knows ye are, and relieve him o' a handful o' guineas. Then ye can go and walk with Miall until nightfall.'

'I . . . I can't *steal*!' she cried in protest. 'I can beg, but I . . . I can't steal.'

Judd gripped her by the hair, twisting it so that she could have cried out but would not because of some deep inner pride. She had learned to bear pain over the years.

'If I let ye go to Miall Birch, I need compensation,' said Judd. 'Yon stranger is a rich man. If he doesn't want to be fleeced, he shouldn't be here.'

'But . . . but he might catch me, and—'

'He has to eat. He canna keep all his valuables on his person. He will leave something in his room. I know his kind, and if he keeps a servant by him, then he has his valuables with him. If ye canna reach his guineas, then tak' what ye can, girl. I can always sell it.'

Jasmine's heart was sick with misery. She had been taught, and well taught—how to be light-fingered, and from whom to steal, and who deserved nothing but honesty. According to their own code, Judd and Rima were the most honest people in the world, but those who did not deserve their valuables were fair game to be relieved of them.

' . . . the Crown Inn,' Judd was saying. 'The gentleman and his manservant are in the biggest room, but they'll eat downstairs.'

Jasmine did not question this. She knew that Judd had his own means whereby he gleaned his information.

'The place is teeming with people. Ye can slip in like a mouse, you're that small and quick, and your eyes are on

everything. Ye can be in and out in a flash, then ye can go to Miall. I'll mak' it right wi' the Birches. They've aye been friends to the Leghs.'

Jasmine took another cup of the herbal brew which Rima held out to her. She drank greedily, then leaned her aching head against the wall of the verdo. She had no choice. If she did not obey, Judd would drink sour ale to give himself more courage, then he would tie her to a post and force her to watch whilst he beat, then assaulted Rima. Only twice before had Jasmine defied Judd: once when he first sent her to steal, and once when she refused to dance because excessive menstrual loss had made her weak and ill. She could bear her own pain, but not the pain of seeing Rima hurt and humiliated.

Rima helped her to put on a plain tattered brown dress and bound up her beautiful, soft, dark red hair in a matching kerchief. The woman's eyes were sad.

'Ye won't wear this rag no more,' she whispered. 'It makes ye look like a poor bit sparrow instead of a fine, beautiful bird.'

Jasmine said nothing, but she knew the drab clothes would dim her looks so that no one noticed her. It was necessary if she had to obey Judd's dictates.

The great gypsy encampment was on a hill overlooking the town, which many called Crowning Fair Hill. Already there were crowds wandering down into the town to sit on the banks of the river into which the horses were plunged each day before being brushed and groomed.

Soon Jasmine was mingling with the crowds around the Crown Inn and managed to slip inside on the pretext of selling the small bunches of dried herbs that Rima had given her in a basket. The servants were too busy to chase

away the gypsy children, and contented themselves with an occasional clout on the ear of the more persistent beggars.

Jasmine saw that the tall gentleman was sitting at a table in the main public room, and his servant was drinking ale and talking to another of his ilk. It was easy to find the best room in the Inn, and she moved like a small brown ghost up the stairs and along the corridor.

The door was easy to open and she stepped inside, leaning against it as she closed it gently. This was certainly the correct room. His tall hat and fine velvet coat had been placed on a chair near the window and a frilled shirt lay folded on the chest of drawers. Quick as a flash Jasmine hurried over to the chest of drawers, and her expert eyes ranged over the oddments which had been laid out. It was immediately apparent that the gentleman was no trusting simpleton, and had most of his valuables on his person, but he had laid aside a trinket box containing cravat pins. There was also a set of silver-backed brushes. Jasmine hesitated, then picked up the trinket box and slipped it into her basket, underneath the bunches of herbs.

A moment later her arm was grabbed from behind and her wrist almost broken in a steel-like grip. She was too frightened to wonder at the intruder's ability to move without noise.

'So, we have a small thief in our midst,' he said, turning her round and pulling her towards the window, 'a small thief who thinks me a blade of grass.'

It was the tall gentleman. He wrenched the kerchief from her head and the rich dark chestnut hair tumbled about her shoulders.

'Ah . . . it is the dancing child,' he said, almost with satisfaction, 'A dancer *and* a thief! What have you to

say for yourself, gypsy girl?’

She had nothing to say. She could only stare at him as boldly as she dared, unable to make any defence of herself because there was none.

‘What’s your name, child?’

She refused to answer and his grip tightened.

‘*Your name.*’

‘Jasmine Legh . . . sir,’ she managed.

‘You can go to jail, Jasmine Legh—or worse, if you’ve been caught before. You realize that?’

She nodded, feeling that death had already come upon her. The stranger’s dark eyes were glittering like black diamonds.

‘Is the old man your father?’

She paused, and again the finger pressure tightened. She nodded.

‘Did he send you to steal from me?’

Again she did not answer. He grabbed his coat and threw it over his shoulders, even though the evening was warm.

‘Lead the way,’ he commanded, ‘back to your caravan. Do you have a caravan?’

‘A verdo.’ Her feet felt leaden. What would Judd do to her this time, and what punishment would he mete out to Rima?

Judd had not gone out drinking. He was waiting for the spoils that Jasmine would bring home, whilst Rima stitched a small tear in the scarlet and gold costume which had been pulled by Jasmine’s small hands as she whirled it wildly round her legs in the dance. Old Coll, Judd’s elderly uncle, was feeding and watering the horse, and the whippet bitch, Bracken, which could run down a roe deer, lay across Jasmine’s bed in faithful guardianship.

The door of the verdo lay open against the warmth of

the evening and the tall dark man almost threw Jasmine into the midst of her family, then followed her in, slamming the door shut behind him.

‘So you have taught your daughter to steal,’ he said to Judd.

The gypsy’s eyes flew to the girl and she started back, shaking her head.

‘No, the child did not blame you. *I* blame you. I thought that gypsies traded horses—aye, and begged maybe—but kept their fingers to themselves. But there are rotten apples in every barrel. I would have the law on you—’

Judd paled. He had served a prison sentence before, and had the gypsy horror of being shut in ingrained into his mind. ‘The girl didn’t know any better,’ he whined. ‘Let her go, sir. Be kind to poor folks . . .’

The stranger’s lips curled. ‘I would have the law on you,’ he repeated, ‘except that the child would be punished rather than you. Instead, I will buy her from you.’ He began to count out guineas onto the table. ‘I have bought a gypsy caravan, a horse, and now I want a gypsy dancing girl.’

‘Ye canna take her, sir!’ cried Rima, starting up from her corner and running to put her arms round Jasmine, who had turned so pale that it seemed she might drop senseless.

But the gentleman’s eyes were on Judd and he clinked out more guineas onto the pile.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘Is it a deal?’

‘The girl is worth more,’ said Judd, his small bleary eyes greedy.

‘She’s not for sale!’ cried Rima. ‘Judd—’

‘Be quiet, woman. She’s a curse on us. She might bring better luck to this gentleman.’

Rima grew quiet and looked at the stranger with secrets

in her eyes. She pushed Jasmine away from her, and the girl's eyes became dark green pools of fear. She hated the verdo, but beyond it was an abyss too frightening to contemplate.

'You said I would be promised to Miall . . . that I would be his wife,' Jasmine whispered to Judd.

'Be quiet,' he said. 'You're too young to wed Miall Birch, but your value is great as a dancing girl. Ye could earn a lot o' pennies for us.' His eyes grew watery again. 'Our hearts would be sore at parting with her, sir,' he whined, 'even if she's not our own daughter. We reared her like our own and she means much to us.'

'Then I might leave her with you and merely inform the law,' said the gentleman, picking up the coins.

'Oh no sir—!' Judd saw himself losing both Jasmine and the money. 'It's just that we . . . we don't know who ye are, sir, or what ye want with Jasmine.'

'I am Elliott Maxwell-Ferguson of Glenlacie. You'll have heard of Glenlacie no doubt?'

Judd nodded. He had been born in Scotland and had travelled there a great deal. Few gypsies had not heard of Glenlacie who knew the Border country. It was a fine estate, rich with game, an abundance of wild life and wild fruits in season.

'I want a girl who will dance for me,' said Maxwell-Ferguson carelessly. No other explanation was needed so far as he was concerned. His long fingers caressed the coins and Jasmine watched with fearful fascination.

Judd struggled with himself, then blurted out an agreement as the coins were suddenly whisked back into the pouch.

'Give the girl her things,' he commanded Rima.

The woman's hands trembled, but her eyes still reflected her secrets.

'She needs nothing. *I* will see to her needs,' the Master of Glenlacie said impatiently. 'Come on, girl. You belong to me now.'

Jasmine wanted to protest and scream for Miall to come and carry her away, but a queer hardness was forming in her stilled tongue, and she recognized the hard core of anger which often dispelled her fears. How could Judd Legh sell her, as though she were one of Bracken's pups! And Rima. Was Rima so afraid of Judd that she could allow this to happen? She had thought that Rima loved her. Now the woman looked at her with stranger's eyes—the look which separated the gypsy from the gaujo.

'Where . . . where are we going?' Jasmine asked as she followed the man out of the verdo and felt his steel-like fingers gripping her arm.

'We will have to see that you do not fly away, my wild bird,' he said. 'You will share a room at the inn with my servant Lachie and myself this night. Oh don't cringe . . . I do not ravish children. Then we'll travel to Glenlacie in my new caravan. I mean, of course, the caravan which is new to me. It's hardly salubrious, but it's very, very genuine.'

In spite of her fatigue, Jasmine did not sleep until the small hours of the morning. The servant, Lachie Grant, lay on a roll of matting across the door and the master slept on a cot near the window. She had been given the bed for the sake of convenience, but it was too soft for her bones. She was unused to such niceties.

She felt heavy and drugged with sleep when Lachie shook her awake and gave her a hunk of bread and cheese to eat, and a glass of milk to drink. Jasmine was hungry

and ate greedily. Her new master was already dressed and was staring out of the window. Already on the hillside beyond the town the place was astir with the gypsies packing up to be on their way, their colour and pageantry and music a mere memory for another year.

Lachie had saddled the fine strong horse to the shabby but strongly built wagon, and Jasmine was propelled downstairs and helped into its gloomy interior. Lachie had even accompanied her that morning, at a nod from his master, whilst she performed her bodily functions. Jasmine was only vexed, however, because she was prevented from running like a hare to find Miall. She did not mind her privacy being invaded since she had never known privacy as far back as she could remember.

The caravan was not as well kept as Rima's, and soon Jasmine was happy to see that the master had removed his coat and was scratching the bites on his arm. How strong and beautiful his arms were, she thought, as she watched him removing his frilled shirt. Yet he was a devil, and Rima had often said that the Devil was beautiful when he assumed human form.

She lay passive, watching whilst he searched out the parasites which were attacking him, a small secret smile on her face. She had a sudden longing to go to his aid, to deal with his new 'friends', and to stroke his strong arms. His hair was as black as Miall's, but crisply curling whereas Miall's was greasy, and his face was finely modelled, though strong in jaw, with firm, straight lips. Would those lips grow tender when they kissed a woman? What would it be like to be loved by such a man?

The heat of the day sent Jasmine's bones on fire as it tended to do ever since she grew old enough for Miall. Then the master's voice cut into her thoughts like a whip-lash.

'God in Heaven, girl, but you're a dirty tribe! We'll stop and get a fire going, and you can boil this shirt until every creature is dead.'

His eyes swept over her distastefully and Jasmine's hard knot of anger and pride grew in her again. She had not asked to be bought, nor had she induced him to buy a verdo and horse when he knew nothing of Romany life.

Their eyes met and she saw his narrowing as they raked her face and body. Her breath stilled, waiting for something, and a new strange excitement gripped her. Then the moment passed. His lips tightened and his brows darkened, and Lachie received the worst of his invective as they pulled into a quiet spot under the trees.

Again his fingers were steely on her shoulder as he pushed her out of the verdo, and ordered her to gather dried wood.

Jasmine worked diligently, without protest, gathering wood and cooking the game which the master and Lachie brought to her, not because she was enjoying her service to them, but because she knew they were being followed, and every instinct told her that it was Miall. She could read the signs, even as she gathered the wood, and she left small clues in return—a twisted twig, a pile of stones, a thread from her shawl tied to a bush.

She was used to the travelling life and the journey did not tire her. They kept to quiet tracks, avoiding towns and villages as far as possible, and this puzzled her. The master was either ashamed of his new purchases, or wanted to avoid attracting attention for some other reason. His own face was as full of secrets as any gypsy's.

Sometimes he forgot she was a new possession and lifted her gently from the caravan (which he preferred to

call the 'wagon') and then she could feel the strength in him as he held her against his chest. She could feel the hardness that she had seen in Judd when he wanted to humiliate Rima, and she knew he desired a woman. To her shame her own body would leap with fire, which became a smoulder in her eyes, but again he would look at her thin frame and thrust her from him.

'You're a case for Meg Balfour,' he said disdainfully. 'She will scold, but she'll clean you up. You poor sparrow—you know no better. Someday . . . someday I might turn you loose again, but not yet . . . not yet . . .'

He had the habit of musing aloud as though she were deaf or an imbecile. Only once was he kind to her, when she awoke crying in the night. The heat of the day had vanished under the roaring of the wind, bringing fierce gusts from the south-west. Great black masses of cloud, torn by the storm, came up from the sea and swept across the moors and the caravan was enveloped in a wall of grey vapour which vanished in torrents of slanting rain.

Jasmine cried out at the noise, fighting and weeping as the master held her thin arms. Her skin was soft as silk under his fingers. She had washed in a mountain stream and her hair smelled of soft peat. Beneath her thin shift her small breasts were heaving with fright. He lay beside her, holding her firmly. Soon she could feel his long fingers caressing her bare thigh and, hesitantly, the soft skin at the top of her legs, and she sighed against him and pulled him close. She could feel the hardness of him against her, then Lachie called loudly.

'Master! Master Elliott! The horse is awa'! The ground has gone soft wi' the rain and he's pulled himsel' free. I'm awa' after him.'

Elliott swore loudly, then roughly pulled Jasmine to a sitting position.

'Damn his hide! But he saved you, child. You . . . you are *not* a child, damn it! You were woman from the cradle . . . but you are still young and unformed. One of these days—'

He was pulling on his coat, and he dashed out into the rain before finishing the sentence.

Jasmine was shaking. Her captor was a devil. He made her body shiver and burn as no one else had done. She had not cared what happened to her, yet she must stay virgin for Miall. Miall would repulse her if she had been violated by a gaujo. She stared out at the heavy drenching rain, and it seemed to be weeping out of her own heart. Soon the hot tears were dropping unchecked from her eyes, but she had no idea for whom she was weeping.

The following day they reached Glenlacie.

CHAPTER TWO

Jasmine had never seen such a large fine house at close quarters. Often, as she travelled the country with Judd and Rima, she had seen great mansions from a distance and vaguely wondered about the noble lords and ladies who lived within their walls. Now she was being ushered into one such residence by the master himself, whilst servants appearing from all directions scurried to do his bidding.

Menservants were leading away the horse and caravan, and Lachie had disappeared in their midst. The master was calling loudly for Meg Balfour and a moment later a plump, motherly woman, clad in a long white apron and cap, came running into the large square hall. Jasmine's eyes were round with wonder as she gazed at the fine furniture, paintings and wall hangings, too interested to remember her fears.

'Mercy on us, Master Elliott, what have ye brought home now?' Meg Balfour was asking, her hands on her hips and her nose wrinkling at the sight of Jasmine.

'She needs to be washed clean, Meg,' he said, pushing the girl towards the older woman, 'and you'd better burn those rags. Put her in one of the east-wing bedrooms. You can find her a shift, can't you? See that she has a decent supper.'

'Come on, lass . . .'

'She's called Jasmine. She's a gypsy.'

'Aye, I can see that,' said Meg dryly. 'A *bedroom*, is it? Come on, lass. Eh, Master Elliott . . . whatever will he be at next? He was aye the wild one . . .'

Meg pulled the reluctant Jasmine along a series of corridors so that she scarcely knew the direction they were taking. The girl hung back in fear, but fascination was at war with her fears and her eyes darted over everything. How rich the man who had bought her must be! He would have given her to the law for stealing a small trinket box, yet he owned pictures and ornaments and rich soft carpets such as she had never seen before.

Finally Meg opened the door of an enormous room—enormous to Jasmine, even if it was a great deal smaller than most of the other bedrooms.

'Stand in the middle of the floor, girl,' Meg commanded, and a moment later she had whisked off every stitch of clothing from Jasmine's back. 'We can't have the house contaminated, and I'll likely have to boil my own clothes into the bargain. Eh, dearie me . . . His father was bad, but Master Elliott—! I'll be back. Don't move.'

Jasmine's throat had contracted into a hard lump. She had hated her old brown begging dress, but it was all she had. Now she had nothing. Meg had very effectively cut off any chance of a quick escape from this huge opulent prison, and although the weather had remained warm, she shivered as she stood with her bare feet on the rich pale green carpet.

A short time later she heard the clatter of shoes in the corridor and Meg opened the door to admit two giggling girls who carried a large bathtub, whilst two more carried kettles of hot water. They stared silently at Jasmine, who gazed back at them defiantly. Underneath her bold gaze

her heart ached with misery. What had she done to deserve this turn-about in her fortunes?

When the bath was to Meg's liking, she turned to Jasmine.

'In ye get, lass. Come on now, we must get the dirt off ye.'

There was nowhere to run and hide, and Jasmine spared a thought for Rima who would have been horrified to see the natural sweats being washed and scrubbed from her body, so that illnesses could attack her freely. Jasmine's skin grew red and tender from Meg's vigorous scrubbing and the water was quite cold before Meg allowed her to step out of it and to be dried with a soft towel. Her tangled hair had also been washed, and Meg brushed it in long sweeping strokes, whilst Jasmine wanted to shriek with pain as the bristles tugged at her scalp. Meg searched her scalp diligently for creatures, humphing and hawing when she found the luxuriant curls surprisingly free of parasites. Jasmine smiled secretly; Rima had always known how to keep hair clean.

Finally a long white shift was dropped over her head and she was pushed into the big four-poster bed which stood in the middle of the room.

'Rest a wee while and ye'll get a bite to eat, then ye can sleep, lass. Ye're just a poor bit thing,' said Meg kindly. Now that some of the hated dirt had been removed from her charge, she was more kindly disposed towards the girl.

'Where are my clothes?' asked Jasmine. 'I have nothing to wear.'

'The master will tell me. Bide where ye are for now.'

Two days later Jasmine was still biding where she was, ready to scream her head off and beat at the walls of her prison. She had never been confined in a house before,

and she felt as trapped as a wild bird in a cage.

Nor was she the only prisoner in the house. The previous evening she had heard a great cry followed by blood-curdling screams coming from one of the bedrooms. Then the servants' heavy shoes had clattered along the corridor, and she recognized the voice of the girl, Leezabeth Craig, who brought her food on a tray.

'It's the Frenchie! It'll be his wound again.'

Jasmine had listened, sick and trembling until the cries died down. What Frenchman, what wound, she wondered. Why was Master Elliott keeping a Frenchman—and herself, a gypsy dancing girl—prisoner in this great house?

Early next morning Jasmine lay in bed listening to the call of the woodpigeons and her heart leapt as she heard one which ended on the wrong note. So Miall was nearby! She must reach Miall, she thought, as she leapt out of bed and ran to the window. It overlooked a large cobbled yard with stables to the west side of the house, and beyond that were the woods which protected Glenlacie from the howling storms which blew up from the sea.

If only she had clothes!

Leezabeth Craig had grown careless. As she opened the door of Jasmine's room and carried in the tray, the gypsy girl was ready for her, and stunned her with an expert blow to the back of her neck. Moments later she had stripped Leezabeth of her long dark grey gown and apron and was pulling it over her own head. Swiftly she bound her hair under the maid's cap, then she picked up the heavy shoes which the girl wore and stole softly along the narrow corridor.

Passing one of the bedrooms she could hear the high

feverish voice of a sick man, and the low measured tones of the master, and her heart almost stopped with fright. But desperation drove her on, down a spiral of stone stairs and along another narrow corridor, past the busy kitchens, to the huge oak door which had been left open against the heat of the day.

Pausing only to slip on the shoes, Jasmine fixed the maid's cap more firmly on her head and strode out into the sunshine. She had often seen maids scurrying about towards the various outbuildings, and now she imitated their movements, calling out some unintelligible remark as the menservants, who were sweeping the cobbles, greeted her cheerfully. Used as she was to stinks and smells, Jasmine's nose nevertheless wrinkled delicately at the smell of dung that seemed to hang in the air, the strong odour intensified by the heat of the day.

She walked boldly into the stables, then stealthily began to lead out a small, finely boned pony, her head kept low against the animal's flanks as she led it away from the buildings which straggled towards the woodland path.

'I shouldn't mount if I were you.'

The voice came from the middle of the path just ahead and Jasmine's heart leapt, then plummeted. It was Master Elliott—yet only a few minutes ago she had heard his voice in the house! She should have remembered how swiftly and silently he could move.

Desperately she tried to leap onto the pony's back, but the master was ahead of her, grasping her in his arms and shouting instructions to one of the men who had come running towards them to grab the pony. Jasmine squirmed and kicked but he carried her with ease back to the house, whilst she beat at him with her small fists and tried to bite his hand.

'Hellcat!' he said softly. 'I can see that you need to be

tamed! And if I cannot tame you, little mountain cat, then the law will have to take its course after all. I should have thought you would know me better by now, and would have learned that what I buy I keep.'

She gulped and grew quiet. She knew he had the power to have her imprisoned, or even worse.

'That's better,' he said, throwing her down on her bed. 'If you were not such a child . . .'

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed slits, and again she said nothing. She was not such a child, but the less she provoked him the better. She could sense the anger in him, yet there was a twisted smile on his lips and a look almost of amusement in his dark eyes.

'So Meg Balfour has uncovered a wild poppy from under the layers of dirt,' he remarked. 'I'll send her to you and she can return the clothing to the serving maid whose head you almost broke. Soon we'll array you properly in your own clothing, and it won't be the dull attire of a serving maid for my gypsy dancer. But you'll have to learn a few lessons first of all.'

'Let me go, sir,' she pleaded, in the whining gypsy voice she had always hated and refused to use before. 'Let me go, kind sir . . .'

His lip curled. 'One of your first lessons will be in speech-training, Miss Jasmine,' he said distastefully. 'Your odious voice does not match your small swaying body and feet. At least no one will need to teach you to dance, but one of these days . . . Oh yes, *one* of these days . . .!'

Again she caught the look in his eyes which sent the blood coursing through her body, then abruptly he left her, banging the door and locking it. Jasmine lay with her head pressed into the pillow. She was to be kept like a doll to dance for him and his friends. She was like a

mechanical toy, to be dressed in gaily coloured clothes and wound up at his will. She was no longer a free gypsy girl; her prison sentence had begun. The only comfort was that she was serving that sentence in a house full of spacious, elegant rooms instead of in the confines and squalor of a woman's prison.

A few minutes later Meg Balfour bustled in, scolding her noisily.

'Dearie me, but do ye not know yet that ye must never cross the master? Such a carry-on, and ye just a young lass. Whatever next?'

Her voice dropped into mutterings as usual, and she talked more to herself than to Jasmine as she stripped her of the servant's clothing.

'... gentleman from France where they are all up against their royalty . . . and fancy ladies . . . and men with the wildness in them—! Aye, maybe . . . but buying bairns to be kept locked up? Dearie me. His father was a wild one but the master can beat them a', he can.' She folded the maid's gown. 'Don't cross him, lass. Do ye hear me? Don't cross him.'

Jasmine wanted to throw herself into Meg's arms and weep her heart out, but she deliberately held her tears at bay. This woman was one of *them*, even though she looked so warm and motherly.

'Here, put this on,' Meg was saying, and once again Jasmine was clothed in her long white shapeless garment.

'Why can't I have any clothes?' she asked stiffly.

'I only follow his orders,' said Meg, 'but Lady Anne is coming. Her room is being made ready.'

'Lady Anne? Who's she?'

'The master's sister. She married Cunningham of Greenlaw in Ayrshire, but she's widowed now. She will maybe talk sense into him. Now eat up your food.'

'I don't want it.'

'Be thankful ye have any after what ye did to poor Leezabeth! Don't expect her to thank ye for it. The master might have beaten ye sick for disobeying him. He's not slow to use his hands when he thinks fit.'

Jasmine shivered. She remembered the way his eyes had narrowed as they looked at her, and she'd had evidence of the violence in him when they first met.

Slowly she ate a bit of the food which Meg had left on the table, then she lay on the bed and pulled the heavy curtains round it so that she could imagine herself in the *verdo* once more. What did this dark-faced man mean to do with her? He owned her now. She was as much his possession as this huge house and all the beautiful pictures and ornaments it contained, not to mention the land and farms which lay beyond. He owned all of them.

Sobbing quietly, she slept at last.

CHAPTER THREE

Early the following morning, Jasmine watched Elliott Maxwell-Ferguson riding out with a few of his men. The fine weather showed signs of breaking; dark clouds were blowing in from the Irish Sea, and Jasmine's bedroom felt airless and oppressive. How silent the huge house seemed, now that the master had gone. Yet she ought to be glad that he no longer towered over her, seemingly able to read her smallest thought.

Here in Glenlacie he was a giant figure of a man and she could hardly realize that it was the same man who had once held her in his arms and comforted her, when her recurring, frightening nightmare had come upon her in the storm. He had scoffed at a gypsy girl being afraid of the storm, but the noise of the wind had awakened long-forgotten memories; she could not explain the terror which sometimes gripped her in the night.

In the afternoon the house was once again full of bustle and noise as it echoed to the high shrill voice of a woman, and Jasmine knew that Lady Anne Cunningham had arrived. She could hear the servants hurrying to obey her orders, and in the courtyard below she could see that a black carriage, with a coat of arms emblazoned on the door, was being carefully cleaned and housed in one of the outbuildings.

Later in the evening the door of her bedroom suddenly

flew open and a tall, slender lady with powdered hair strode into the room. Jasmine sat up in bed and gave Lady Anne stare for stare. She was not going to be intimidated by any other person, male or female, she promised herself. Were they not all merely creatures on the face of the earth, whether clothed in silks or rags?

Lady Anne appraised Jasmine with silent scrutiny, then her nose wrinkled a little and her lip curled. Stepping back she closed the door and a short time later Jasmine could hear her strident voice giving orders to the servants. For once her own cheeks were warm with shame and embarrassment as she looked at her bedroom from Lady Anne's viewpoint. It had been a lovely fresh room when she came to it, but now the bed was soiled and crumpled, and there were stains on the polished wood where she had spilled or thrown her food whilst in a temper.

In the oppressive heat there was a warm animal odour, no doubt emanating from herself. Since she had knocked out Leezabeth, the serving girls were loth to work in the room, and Jasmine had contributed nothing towards keeping it tidy. Now she slipped out of bed and tried to tidy the bedclothes, but she found it difficult since she was unused to such a large bed.

Meg Balfour hurried in and bade her get back under the bedclothes to hide her semi-nakedness, then a moment later a manservant appeared and opened her window from the top.

'Lady Anne says the air is foul,' Meg said sharply, 'and so it is. But don't think ye can flee awa', my lass. Your wings would let ye down sadly ere ye reached the ground. Now we'll leave ye some cleaning rags and ye can clean up the room. There's no reason why the serving lasses should have to serve ye. The master gave no orders for service for ye, but your room grows dirty, so see that ye clean it well,

or Lady Anne will be in a temper again.'

Jasmine cleaned up the spilled food and rubbed half-heartedly at the wooden chests and chairs. She drank in great gulps of fresh air and felt better, and she was grateful to Lady Anne for the small kindness, however it was meant.

Later in the day the master rode home again and in the cool of the evening Jasmine could hear him and Lady Anne walking into the room underneath her own, their voices raised in argument. Lady Anne must be fond of fresh air, she decided, as she heard the window being opened, and Elliott's voice reaching her clearly.

'I don't care for your opinion, sister. I know what I'm doing.'

'I hope so,' said Lady Anne tartly.

Jasmine held her breath. If she listened carefully she could probably hear their conversation.

Elliott was weary after a hard day's riding as he opened the window for his sister. Greenlaw was cold as the grave he often told her laughingly, and Glenlacie was never warm whilst she was under its roof.

'A gypsy dancer!' she cried. 'Really, Elliott, what madness is this? Can't you find better entertainment than that? Have you no plans to settle down and breed an heir? You owe it to Glenlacie.'

'If you would leave me alone to get on with my affairs,' said Elliott mildly, 'I'm sure I could fulfil all your wishes, but it isn't so easy to get Anne-Marie out of France.'

'Anne-Marie? Anne-Marie de Castillon-Cazals?'

'Who else, sister? Her brother André lies upstairs in high fever from his wounds. I was lucky to get him out of France alive, but his wounds are festering and the

physician is bleeding him and putting soothing unguents on his abrasions. I'm surprised you haven't berated me for having André under my roof too.'

'I haven't yet had time to check up on everything and I've no doubt you have the servants well primed. But what madness made you bring André de Castillon-Cazals to Glenlacie?'

Elliot walked up and down slowly.

'It's a long story, sister,' he said at length. 'His parents, the Comte and Comtesse, had to leave their Paris home suddenly. There is great unrest in France, as you know, Anne.'

'I know. The émigré population of London grows at an alarming rate.'

'I went to France a few weeks ago to try to persuade Anne-Marie to marry me.'

'You wish to marry Anne-Marie?' exclaimed Lady Anne. 'This is good news indeed! Our families have been close friends since—oh I don't know when.'

'Since the Rebellion of '45,' said Elliott, 'when some of our family took up arms for Prince Charles Edward, and had to run to France to escape the consequences.'

'I know that we owe the Castillon-Cazals a great deal,' Lady Anne nodded.

'And the Maxwell-Fergusons pay their debts,' said Elliott grimly. 'I would have brought the family to Glenlacie, but the Comtesse is unwell and cannot stand our climate when the rain blows in and we are lashed with high winds. Her chest is weak and the Comte decided to take her south to their estate in the Dordogne, and perhaps on to Spain. She was of Spanish blood, you know.'

'I know,' Lady Anne nodded. 'Go on. I'm still waiting to hear why you have André upstairs and not Anne-Marie.'

'They escaped the Paris house without a moment to spare. The anger of the people was spreading fast. There is great social inequality, and the people resent privilege in people of noble birth, so homes are being wrecked and possessions thrown to the mob. The Comte managed to remove his family to the estate near Sainte Foy-la-Grande, but many valuables were left behind in Paris, and André volunteered to return there to try to recover a strongbox full of valuable papers. The Comte thought he had put it in his carriage, but he had not. The box contained this . . .'

He put his hand into his pocket and held out a huge, glittering stone to Lady Anne.

'Elliott! It . . . it's the de Castillion-Cazals diamond, isn't it? The diamond they call the Crystal Heart? What are *you* doing with it?'

Elliott tossed it into the air and caught it neatly. It was a fifty-eight carat Indian diamond.

'I don't know all of its history,' he said as he walked up and down, tossing the diamond. 'I know that it reached Burgundy sometime in the fifteenth century and came into the possession of the King of Portugal, having been taken from Charles the Bold at the Battle of Nancy. Later it came into the possession of the Castillon-Cazals family, one of their ancestors having done great service to the King, and now it is a great heirloom and a very famous stone.'

'Put it away, Elliott,' pleaded Lady Anne, having examined the beautiful diamond. 'For a woman who loves precious stones, it's a sore temptation. You still haven't told me how you have come by it.'

'André reached the Paris house the day before I arrived to look for Anne-Marie, not knowing she was with her parents in Sainte Foy. He had strapped the Crystal Heart

to his person and had packed the strongbox with other valuables. He was about to leave the house when I arrived and we suspect that one of the servants betrayed him. Suddenly the mob was upon him. I still had my carriage nearby and somehow I got him into it as we fought off the rabble. They were greedy for his strongbox and they let him go, believing him to be dead of his wounds. They recognized me for an Englishman and had no quarrel with me. Somehow I got André to a small port north of Dieppe and thence across the Channel, and we made a nightmare journey to Glenlacie with André growing more and more enfeebled and in high fever. Now he's still very ill, but the fever is checked and his mind is centred on one important thing—the returning of the Crystal Heart to his parents and Anne-Marie. It will give the Comte and Comtesse a new start in Spain. And as for Anne-Marie . . . well, she might easily be persuaded to become the Mistress of Glenlacie.

‘So you see, dear sister, I must return with the Crystal Heart to France.’

‘But how?’ cried Lady Anne. ‘You were lucky to escape with your own life. You could be attacked and robbed before you’ve left England. There are spies everywhere and it is a famous diamond. Why, even the diamonds which were in the Garde Meuble have been stolen!’

‘I know, I know,’ said Elliott. ‘It burns white-hot to my fingers. But I have a plan. I will travel to France as a gypsy, with my gypsy caravan, my horse, and my dancing girl. I bought them all from real gypsies at Appleby Fair, and I can accompany my dancer on the tambourine just as her mother has done for her. She will wear a beautiful bright costume—which you will help to design for her—and everyone will think of her as my jewel. They will be too fascinated by her dancing to suspect me of

carrying the Crystal Heart.'

'You are mad!' cried Lady Anne. 'Travel through France with a gypsy dancing girl! You have lost your senses, brother.'

He laughed softly. 'I swear I concocted the scheme out of sheer desperation, in an attempt to put André's mind at rest, but the more I think about it, the more I like it. The people of France leave the gypsies alone. They are afraid of curses as much as anyone—and I assure you my little wild bird can curse! She has hurled her gypsy incantations at my head, even if she thinks it is only normal abuse from a gypsy to a gaujo. It surprises me that I have not already turned into a toad.'

'Elliott,' cried Lady Anne, sudden fear in her eyes, 'Elliott, take care with that queer child. I don't know what it is, but I found her . . . compelling.'

Elliott's eyes sobered. 'She needs a firm hand, and I can give her that. Lachie will travel with us, just as soon as the caravan is ready, and you and your sewing woman have made a dancing costume for my little twinkletoes. It must be very spectacular, Anne, so that our audience will be fascinated. I've purchased the necessary materials and they should be here tomorrow. Do your best to help me, Anne. If I get a wife out of the affair, then you should be glad to help.'

'Why must you always take the hard road, Elliott? I could find you a dozen girls to marry within a few miles of Glenlacie, but you must go to France in a gypsy caravan to seek your bride!'

'Perhaps I like my woman to be a little out of reach,' said Elliott lightly. 'And now would you like to come upstairs and see André? He might be my brother one day. The physician comes daily and the nursemaid looks after him diligently. His fever has dropped but he is still alarm-

ingly weak. You can help me to set his mind at rest.'

'Very well, Elliott, we'll go to him now.'

The voices had faded and Jasmine was greatly disappointed. She had sat stiffly on her window ledge with her ears strained to catch as much of the conversation as she could. Unfortunately Elliott had walked up and down the room and there was a great deal which she had not been able to hear. She knew she was going to be asked to dance for someone. But who? And when?

One thing had dealt her a strange blow to the heart—yet why she should care she had no idea. Surely it was natural for the Master of Glenlacie to be married, and to marry a great lady suited to be the wife of such a gentleman? But the harsh, sick venom of jealousy began to well up in Jasmine; she told herself that it was anger against Anne-Marie who was being allowed to marry the man of her choice whilst she, Jasmine, was being denied to Miall Birch.

She leaned her head against the window, remembering the soft beauty of Elliott's arms and the way he had held her tenderly. A moment longer and she would have been his, she knew, and deep excitement gripped her groin, making her tremble from head to foot at the thought. But he had only been passing an hour with her. He loved this Anne-Marie and would be bringing her to Glenlacie as his wife.

Jasmine wished she could have heard when he hoped to accomplish this and if he was keeping her at Glenlacie to dance for his new wife. Surely a gypsy dancing-girl was a strange gift for a bride? If only Master Elliott had been standing close to the window, then she might have heard how long she was expected to remain at Glenlacie.

Jasmine could now hear Lady Anne's voice further along the corridor in the Frenchman's room. So he was not a prisoner. He was like to be a relative of his host's . . . that much she had heard. *She* was the only prisoner in the house! Once again her heart cried out for Miall. Miall would love her for herself, and not wish to use her as a toy to entertain his friends. Miall knew that she was made of flesh and blood and his eyes had flashed their message at Appleby Fair that he had staked his claim to her. She had known this to be true when she read the signs that Miall was following her to Glenlacie. Miall was a true gypsy; he would not allow Elliott Maxwell-Ferguson to take his woman.

As she dropped off to sleep another phrase floated into Jasmine's thoughts. The Crystal Heart. What was meant by that? What *was* the Crystal Heart?

CHAPTER FOUR

Jasmine's fortunes took a turn for the better after Lady Anne settled into Glenlacie. The master rode out a great deal on business, but Lady Anne's sewing woman was quick with her needle and soon Jasmine was being clothed in plain but becoming gowns which would have pleased her better had they been lower at the neckline and festooned with embroidery and frills.

After some rebellion she began to enjoy her daily scrubbing in the bath and she took pleasure in the fact that her body, where it had not been burned by the elements, was as soft and pink as any lady's.

She had grown docile, believing that this was the best way of dealing with her situation, and soon Lady Anne was advocating that Jasmine should be allowed to come downstairs to the small parlour, in her care.

'I'll look after her, Elliott,' she said. 'I feel sorry for the child. Do you know, I believe she is beginning to learn a few manners—and I've even caught her trying to copy some of my own mannerisms! I could make a lady out of her, I do believe.'

'You will not try it,' said Elliott firmly. 'I want a dancer, not a lady, though I confess I would have her habits cleaned up if I must be in her company. The quicker her dancing costume is made, the better.'

'I will have to consult with the child,' said Lady Anne. 'She'll know what is most comfortable for her and most attractive to her audience. And it had better be well stitched if it must last out the journey. Marion Simpson is a fine needlewoman, however, and she enjoys the novelty of such gaudy colours and beaded ornamentation.'

'Let Jasmine help by all means, but don't take your eye off her for a second. She is not so tame as you might think,' Elliott told her.

Jasmine was enchanted with the lovely downstairs rooms, and wandered around stroking the beautiful ornaments and bending down to press her fingers into the fine rugs. She was engaged in looking closely at a painting one afternoon when Elliott walked into the room, pausing abruptly at the sight of his gypsy girl. Jasmine's hair had been newly washed and combed so that it fell in rich dark curls down her back. Lady Anne had wanted to tie it into neat plaits, but for once Jasmine defied her. She could not bear to have her hair confined, and the older woman had shrugged and given way.

Now her tumbling curls were at variance with the neat amber brown dress, which had become moulded to Jasmine's body so that her budding breasts were shown to best advantage. Being kept indoors and washed frequently, her dark skin had paled to a ripe peach colour, and her green eyes shone with health from the well-cooked food served to her from the kitchens.

She turned swiftly, feeling his dark eyes appraising her, and the warm blood tinged her cheeks.

'I . . . I was admiring the picture,' she said hesitantly, pointing to a still-life of wild flowers.

Again his eyes flickered with surprise. The voice, too, had changed a little, reflecting the influence of Lady

Anne, and suddenly there was irritation and anger in him. He did not want to be saddled with a young lady on the journey to France, bearing in mind the hazards they were likely to encounter. He only wanted a gypsy dancer . . . a nobody.

'It would be too difficult to smuggle it out to your gypsy friends,' he said cruelly. 'Don't try it, my little thief.'

She flushed scarlet and her docility vanished into hurt at the harsh note in his voice and the look of contempt in his eyes.

'I am not a thief!' she cried. 'Oh, you make me feel ill . . . sick. *Čuckerdya pal m're per, Čáven save miseče!*'

He grinned as she shouted her gypsy incantation. That was better. The new lady-like appearance was only a veneer.

'What is it this time?' he asked, laughing. 'A snake? Or perhaps a goat? I've heard that witches are fond of goats.'

'I was driving the sickness out of myself,' she cried, 'the sickness you make me feel.'

Her arms flailed at him and he caught them in a vice-like grip, looking into the sparkling emerald green of her eyes.

'I can drive it out with a kiss,' he said, smiling and she felt the softness of his mouth on hers, then the strength of his lips as he pulled her against him. Still she struggled, feeling that he used her as a mere plaything, to be taken up and put down at will. He could not see that she was a real person with feelings which could be bruised easily, feelings which she could hardly understand herself . . . Her body seemed to glow with liquid fire.

Then, as suddenly as he had kissed her, it was over and he was striding from the room with inner laughter shaking him.

Jasmine found that her cheeks were wet with angry

tears, but now her sobs subsided into small hiccups. She hated him. She was like a rag doll in his arms, a marionette to be manipulated as soon as he picked up the strings. Didn't he realize that there was now no one to love her, that she needed to be loved? She had thought that Rima loved her, but Rima had allowed her to be sold. Now there was only Miall, if she could find him. She *would* find him, thought Jasmine, wiping away her tears. A gypsy knew how to wait, and Miall would be waiting for her even if he was wandering around the area. If she found Miall, they could run away together; the master would never be able to trace them. She would never dance for him again.

In spite of her resolutions, Jasmine could not help but take an interest in her new dancing costume. Elliott had bought expensive silks and gold thread, with brilliants to be sewn onto the bodice and head-dress.

For once Elliott was approving. 'I don't want an ordinary gypsy dancer. I want a queen, or perhaps a princess in Jasmine's case.'

Marion Simpson glowed with pride as Lady Anne placed the head-dress on Jasmine's head and pushed a looking glass towards her. The girl acknowledged that it was beautiful. It had been made from red silk to match the dress and glowed with brilliants which seemed to reflect the fire from her dark chestnut hair.

'Why, Jasmine—you could well be a great beauty one day,' Lady Anne exclaimed, then fell silent, her eyes troubled. She had been feeling perturbed by the journey which Elliott purposed making, and especially Jasmine's part in it. There was something unusual about the girl, something different . . . She hoped that Elliott would not

live to regret having bought his gypsy. There was something in the whole scheme which was disturbing. Lady Anne would have liked to return Jasmine to her friends and ask Elliott to devise some other means of getting Anne-Marie out of France. Yet it grieved her to think of the Castillon-Cazals family being in trouble or need of any kind. They were gentle people and did not deserve the fate of a large number of nobles in France. They had always cared for their estates and looked after their tenants with kindness and consideration.

Lady Anne thought about Anne-Marie, who was as fair as Elliott was dark. The Moon often chased across the Heavens after the Sun, but she had never seen them standing hand in hand. Anne-Marie was a sun maiden. Would she be happy at Glenlacie, where for several months of the year the sun rarely shone and the old house was battered with wind and rain? Lady Anne sighed and turned her thoughts to the boy who lay sick in one of the bedrooms. At least the plan had given André de Castillon-Cazals some ray of hope.

His fever had dropped and he was now well on the way to recovery.

As the days slowly passed and preparations went forward for his journey, Elliott was away from home more and more whilst the women stitched at Jasmine's costume. Lady Anne decided one day that extra embroidery silks were needed, as well as other sundry items for her own use, and ordered the carriage for a drive to town. She pondered a little over whether she should lock Jasmine in her room, then decided to put the girl on trust for an afternoon.

'Do you promise to remain within the precincts of the

house?' she asked. 'Do I have your solemn word?'

'Yes, Lady Anne,' said Jasmine demurely.

Really, the child *had* developed, thought Lady Anne. She was almost presentable now and her coarse gypsy tongue was merely a faint accent behind the precision of her speech. She was even learning to read and write and Lady Anne was enjoying teaching her new accomplishments. She felt a growing fondness for the child.

Jasmine put on her simplest gown as soon as the carriage rolled down the drive, and found an old dark cloak which Lady Anne wore in the garden. She told Meg she was merely going out for a breath of fresh air.

'Aye, true enough,' Meg admitted, 'Ye are on the pale side now. Yet ye were as brown as a nut when the master brought ye to me. I thought he was giving me a wee monkey to train.'

Jasmine shuddered. She had felt more like an animal than a girl at that time. Perhaps she should stay indoors, she thought. Yet the call of the gypsy was strong in her. The gypsies were camping in a clearing through the woods. She had heard Leezabeth saying so, telling one of the other servants where to go if she wanted her fortune told. Would that be Lanny Birch, Miall's sister, wondered Jasmine. Lanny could tell fortunes—*pen baji*—by reading people's palms, though she would not read Jasmine's. Lanny had shielded her eyes from her, and Jasmine knew her to be jealous because of Miall. They were brother and sister but Lanny loved Miall almost like the love of a woman for a man. It was not natural, thought Jasmine, and she felt uncomfortable in Lanny's presence. It would be better when her mother made her marry.

Swiftly she walked past the stables and took the woodland path towards the clearing. She stopped to read more signs

in the wood, and her heart leapt as she began to believe that Miall was nearby. But when she reached the clearing, there were only the signs of an encampment; the clearing was now deserted.

Disconsolately Jasmine turned back towards Glenlacie. She made a pile of stones and twisted a few sticks to leave a message that she had been at the campsite and was still at Glenlacie. Her quick eye had caught sight of gypsy snares for wild game, and it was quite possible that Miall would return to pick up his prey.

She was near to Glenlacie when a twig snapped behind her and suddenly she whirled round to find Miall grinning at her from the centre of the path.

‘Oh Miall! I knew you would come!’ she cried.

‘Jasmine Legh—!’

Miall held out his arms and she flew to them like a bird. He grabbed her in a vice-like hold and there was a shout of triumph in his voice. He had marked her for his own after noticing her a year ago at the Fair and he had willed her to his arms, biding his time until she was drawn back to him. He had collected bulbous roots and planted them in a clean pot never used before and chanted Jasmine’s name over it, morning and evening: *‘As this root grows and as this blossom blows, May her heart be turned unto me!’*

‘I knew ye would come on this last day,’ he said. ‘The others move on, but I will stay here for a week.’

‘Oh Miall, I’ll come with you now!’ she cried.

His lips crushed hers fiercely and she wanted his love. The need to be loved was a great thirst in her.

‘No, I can’t take ye now, Jasmine,’ he said, putting her away from him.

‘But you say you want me and you’ve put your claim on me. I knew you had, Miall. I read all your signs correctly, didn’t I?’

'Ye did, my squirrel. I marked ye last year and I said my spells for ye. I know ye are mine. But we can wait for the time to be ripe, little flower, because nothing on earth can keep ye from me now. Wherever ye go, I shall find ye. And if ye do as I say, we can have rich pickings to help us start a life together.'

'What rich pickings, Miall?'

'Whatever ye can find. Just think how Fate has driven ye into that big rich mansion for us. It must be full of treasures and they won't miss whatever ye smuggle out to me. I can sell them, and then we'll have the best verdo at the Fair next year and none shall touch us for finery.'

Jasmine stepped back a little, sick with disappointment. She had thought that Miall would take her to himself and never want to let her go. But he was no better than Judd. All he wanted was for her to steal for him!

'I . . . I don't want to go back, Miall. I never want to go back. They just want me to be a dancing girl. Judd sold me to the Master of Glenlacie so that I can be his dancing girl.'

'And if ye run away with me, they'll set the law on us,' said Miall. 'We'd be put in prison, or we might be topped even, if that dark-faced man is thwarted. He's a powerful man, is the Master of Glenlacie. That much I have found out. He has powerful friends.'

'And you are afraid!' said Jasmine accusingly.

'I'm not a fool,' Miall muttered, then caught her to him again. This time she noticed the strong animal smell of him, the dirt which clung to his shirt and to his neck where the collar was open. It was some time now since Meg had scrubbed off her own dirt and with a sense of shame Jasmine realized that this was how she must have looked to Elliott.

She grew still in Miall's arms and he looked at her keenly.

'If ye sulk, I won't like that in a wife,' he told her sullenly. 'A woman must be obedient to her man.'

She stepped back and nodded. 'All right, Miall, I shall not ask you to take me again.'

'Then ye'll steal for us both?' he asked eagerly. 'We could maybe sell enough fancy ornaments and silver to get us passage to America! Think of that! The law couldn't touch us in America.'

'I'd better go. Lady Anne will be home,' said Jasmine in a dull voice.

Miall did not really want her for herself. He only wanted to use her, like Judd and Elliott Maxwell-Ferguson. They all wanted to use her. The hood of her cloak had fallen from her head and, as she turned to look at Miall, she saw his eyes changing.

'Ye . . . ye're beautiful, Jasmine,' he said. 'Ye look different.'

'I'm clean,' she said drily, but he was again reaching out for her, the light of desire burning in his eyes. For a long moment Jasmine struggled with herself. She knew that Miall now wanted her for herself and that she was beginning to have the power to make men desire her. Some women were desired by men, women like Leezabeth who gave the menservants her favours on hot days behind the hay barn. And some women were loved by men, women like Lady Anne and . . . and Anne-Marie, sister to the Frenchman. Jasmine wanted to be loved. She wanted to be desired for herself. She wanted respect.

'Somebody's shouting,' she said breathlessly, before the heat of her blood made her forget everything but Miall's desire for her. 'I must go. Unless—' she added, her eyes malicious—'unless you have changed your mind,

Miall, and would take me as I stand after all.'

'No, ye must go,' he agreed. 'I need more to offer ye than a hard life of dancing and begging and selling herb potions. Together we can do better than that.'

His words were suddenly tender and tears rushed to her eyes. Perhaps Miall did love her properly and thought that his plans would give them the best possible life, according to his own lights. He would risk imprisonment if he took her in any case. Why not take what they needed and buy a new life in a new country? At one time she would have thought his reasoning very sound, but now . . . now she hardly knew what she thought.

Disconsolately she returned to the house and was busily helping Meg when Lady Anne returned with extra material for her dress.

She laughed with delight when she saw Jasmine so engaged. 'You gave your word and you kept it,' she said, warmly. 'I'm pleased with you, Jasmine.'

'Thank you, my lady,' said Jasmine.

She had forgotten until now that she *had* given her word to Lady Anne.

Jasmine was very quiet during the next few days. Even Elliott's return from Edinburgh, where he had been spending several days on business, failed to rouse her out of her apathy.

'I had thought that my sparrow might turn into a canary and would sing loudly in praise of such fine new feathers,' he said as he looked at the progress which had been made in the sewing room.

'I cannot sing, sir. I can only dance when I feel joyful,' said Jasmine dully.

'You will dance for me however you feel,' Elliott told her grimly.

He was looking tired, though Jasmine heard him remark to Lady Anne that his plans were almost completed. What plans? For bringing home his bride? She knew this was so because Lady Anne commented one day that the window hangings were now dull.

‘The hangings are well enough,’ said Elliott.

‘Perhaps Anne-Marie will persuade you that when crimson velvet becomes soiled pink, it is time to make a change.’

‘It will give her something to do,’ Elliott shrugged. ‘She’ll enjoy making changes.’

Jasmine began to hate the very sound of Anne-Marie. If she were still here when the Frenchwoman arrived as Mistress of Glenlacie, then she *would* smuggle out a few pretty baubles to Miall. She would run away before she became an object of disdain to some lofty woman. At least Lady Anne treated her like a human being.

Lady Anne was beginning to trust her more and more and Jasmine had the freedom of the great house, though the door to the Frenchman’s room was always kept closed. There was a nurse in attendance and every day the physician would arrive and stalk up the stairs rather pompously whilst a small procession of people headed by Lady Anne, or Meg Balfour, walked with him to the sickroom.

Sometimes Jasmine would listen, impassively, to cries of pain as the man’s wounds were dressed. She was used to pain and she bore her own stoically when Judd beat her for some misdemeanour, usually after he had been drinking. She hated to watch Rima’s pain, and hated the more to see the horse or the dogs being beaten, or a bantam’s neck wrung when it was to be used for the pot. The silent pain of an animal was the worst to bear, so that the more the Frenchman called out, the less Jasmine troubled herself.

Sometimes she grew curious about him, but after learning that his sister might be the mistress of the house very soon, she could take no delight in him and imagined him to be a milksop who had to be pandered to constantly. She had learned that he was young, and thought he was little more than a boy.

The door of his apartment was open one day as she passed by, and she saw that the nurse was carrying his change of linen to the laundry in the absence of one or two maidservants. There had been an outbreak of sickness in the kitchens and Lady Anne had caused the tables and floors to be scrubbed clean, and the cooking utensils to be boiled.

'They are grown careless without a mistress,' Lady Anne had complained to Elliott. 'They need to be made to work in the kitchens. They depend on the dogs to clean the floor!'

'In good time,' said Elliott absently.

'I shall purchase more cleaning material this very day,' Lady Anne proclaimed. 'We had better supervise your food, Elliott.'

'No need today,' he replied. 'I will be from home until evening.'

Now the house was quiet as Jasmine wandered about. Her costume was almost finished and she wondered if the master was going to give a great ball to celebrate his engagement, and have her dance for him. Would Anne-Marie suddenly appear one day in a carriage at the door? She had no clear idea what was going to happen in the immediate future, but she knew that the master had some great plans afoot.

She watched the nurse disappear round the corner as the woman made for the spiral staircase at the back of the house, then she peeped into the sickroom. A young man

with tumbled dark hair lay white-faced amongst the pillows and Jasmine tiptoed forward to look down on him. He opened dark, pain-filled eyes and his face lit up with a smile.

'*Mon Dieu!* Have I gone to live with the angels at last? Am I dead, little one?'

Jasmine laughed. He had such a droll accent. 'No, of course not. I'm Jasmine.'

'Jasmine?'

'I'm a dancer. I have to dance for the master.'

André's eyes were puzzled, then he smiled again. 'What does it matter? You are here and it makes me well to look on one so pretty. You must be the dancer on the music box brought to life by my kind fairy. Will you dance for me, pretty Jasmine?'

'Not today,' she said, shaking her head. 'The nurse might come back and find me talking to you, then I shall be in trouble.'

'You are much in trouble?'

'Quite a lot,' she admitted and he laughed with delight.

'Me, I was also much in trouble. Who does the mischief, they ask, and always it is André, André. Why not be in trouble for something instead of nothing and dance for me?'

'I need my dancing costume. It's almost ready. If I can come and dance for you when it is finished, I will come. Perhaps I can ask the master.'

'Stolen fruit tastes best. But if you cannot dance, you cannot. Tell me who you are and how you come here.'

Jasmine paused. Would the master be angry if she told the young Frenchman the truth? Perhaps he would not care to have Anne-Marie know that he had bought a gypsy dancer. If only she knew his plans for her!

'Do your parents live near?' he was asking.

'I . . . I have no parents. They died many years ago. I am alone.'

'*Pauvre petite*. Ah, it is sad when one is separated from the parents, but even more sad if they are dead. And you have no one?'

'No one.' She shook her head. No one but Miall. Once again her thoughts were clinging to Miall; he was all she had.

'Then you must have me and I will be brother to you, or cousin, or just very, very good friend . . . no? If you cannot dance, then you can kiss André. Ah, how long is it since I was kissed by a pretty girl! The nurse is not very pretty. She looks like a horse. I like the horses very much, but not the face on a lady.'

Jasmine was laughing happily. André certainly cheered her up.

'Come then, what is a kiss? You can do that for me, no?'

'I can do that for you, yes,' she smiled, and bent down to kiss him. André's arms encircled her neck with surprising strength for an invalid and Jasmine found that she was being kissed with passion.

A moment later there was a howl of rage from the doorway, and she was pulled backwards from the bed so roughly that she almost fell to the floor. Stunned, she looked up to see Elliott glaring at her with fury in his eyes.

'Harlot!' he cried. 'Is a sick man unsafe from you in his sick bed? You'll come with me, you young . . . young female . . . and I will give you a lesson.'

'Ah, non, non!' André was calling. 'She—'

His words were drowned as the nurse hurried back into the room and Elliott carried Jasmine, kicking and screaming, back to her own bedroom where he threw her on the bed, then turned to lock the door.

Her cries ceased as she looked at the black rage on his face, and once again she was convinced that a devil lived in him as he fell on her and began to pull off first her garments, then his own.

As she realized what was about to happen to her, Jasmine fought like a tigress, biting and scratching in order to save herself for Miall. If he was going to marry her one day, he would want her pure for himself, not defiled by a gaujo. She twisted and turned, but the movements of her young body only seemed to inflame the devil in Master Elliott. It occurred to her that he must be experienced in taking a woman; he made her powerless against him by his own lithe strength.

But her body was still young and tender and as she felt him violate her virginity, there was a sudden searing pain and she cried out as he thrust into her again and again.

Then, his rage spent with his seed, he lay panting on the bed whilst she turned away from him. So often she had imagined herself taken in love, but now she had been taken in anger and her only reward a bed of pain. Jasmine could not prevent the tears from wetting her cheeks, nor the sobs from racking her body.

Slowly Elliott sat up, his eyebrows raised as he saw that she had bled from his assault on her. Leaning back down again, he gently stroked her hair and attempted to take her into his arms to comfort her.

'You . . . you were virgin, Jasmine,' he said in a low voice, 'yet some of my menservants saw you with the gypsy.'

'It was Miall,' she said thickly. 'He would not violate me without wedding with me.'

'Well, you are only a gypsy girl,' Elliott said, shrugging. 'You belong to me. I bought you and I can do what I like with my property. If I want you, I take you. Why were you

kissing the gentleman who is my guest?’

‘Because he asked me!’ she cried. ‘Because he needs some sweetness in his life to make it worth the living. He needs to come back into the world, and to laugh and play—but you keep him locked away as you do your other possessions. He is *your* friend. He *belongs* to you.’

With a snort of laughter, Elliott leapt from the bed. As he tightened his belt, he looked down at her with a twisted smile still on his lips.

‘So the poor broken bird is recovering! Her tears have gone. It hurts a little at first, but one day you might be begging to remind me that I have a dancer to keep me entertained, and not only by her dancing. One day you might find a man’s love very much to your taste.’

‘That was not love,’ she said clearly. ‘That was . . . that was anger, fury, hate even, but not love. Only Miall can love me.’

‘*Miall!*’ he shouted. ‘If you defile this house by mentioning that gypsy’s name again, by God I shall cut out your tongue! You can forget the man. And if you had made off with him, you would not have gone far, my little bird. Rest assured of that. And don’t try to grease his palms with *my* silver, or you hang. Do you understand?’

She paled. He meant it. Her precious life would mean no more to him than that of a chicken when it was plump enough for the pot.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, her green eyes enormous in her small white face. ‘I understand.’

She pulled herself up, wincing with pain, and the warm living hair fell about her shoulders and covered her small breasts.

He stared at her and his voice was subdued when he spoke: ‘I will send Meg to you. Remain where you are. You’ll be better when she has attended to you.’

Meg's face was dour and her eyes shamed as she gave orders for a bath to be brought and clean linen for the bed.

'I told ye not to cross him,' she whispered to Jasmine as she helped the girl into the bath. 'Poor bairn. I know ye're a gypsy girl, but sometimes ye're just like an ordinary bairn such as Lady Anne was herself when she was still in the schoolroom. Bide still. The warm water will help.'

Elliott's attack had left her body bruised and sore, but the warm water soothed and comforted her a little. Jasmine allowed a faint sigh to leave her lips.

'I nursed him as a bairn,' continued Meg, 'and he aye took what he wanted, but sometimes he over-stepped himself and had to be skelped. Mind you, he took his skelping without a murmur when he knew he deserved it. Now he could do with it again, but he's too big to skelp, and he's the master. So don't cross him, my bairn. He's a hard man.'

Jasmine was more comfortable when she was put back into bed. Normally the maidservants would not attend to her, feeling that she was lower in status than themselves, but now they had warmed her bed and there was kindness in their glances. Jasmine ran her hands over her body, feeling that she was now different, yet she felt just the same. She had imagined that love-making was a great desire for a woman, remembering how Rima had sometimes cried out in the night. But for her there had been nothing . . . and yet . . . Hadn't there been a queer sort of anticipation towards the end? Hadn't her body thrilled a little? She lay trying to recapture that moment and trying to see what lay beyond, but it would not return however much she thought about it.

And now Miall seemed further away than ever, and he was the only one who offered love. Now there was no one to love her, and her heart once again cried out for Miall.

Whatever the master said, she would go to Miall as soon as the opportunity arose.

But she would not steal for him.

CHAPTER FIVE

André's health began to improve steadily after Jasmine's visit. He often asked Elliott to let her come and talk to him, but Elliott had given his orders and Jasmine kept well away from the sickroom. Soon André declared that he felt well enough to come downstairs and Lady Anne advocated that the two young people should be companionable together, even if Elliott's looks were black at the thought.

'I don't want him to talk to her,' he declared to his sister as Jasmine took André's arm and walked with him onto the terrace. 'I'll tell her all she needs to know.'

'You asked him not to speak of your plans to anyone. Do you take André for a fool? Or don't you want the child to know that you go to France to bring back a bride?'

'How can that matter to the gypsy?'

'I'm sure I cannot imagine,' said Lady Anne. 'You are the one who is making the fuss, Elliott. I still think your plans are a madness, and I wonder if you do not agree with me. You are a long time in putting them into practice.'

'I had to see André well first of all, and the caravan is being properly fitted for a long journey. Besides, I expect a visitor soon.'

'Who?'

'An old friend. Thomas Muir of Edinburgh.'

'Thomas Muir!' cried Lady Anne. 'Isn't he that Edin-

burgh advocate who would have us emulate the Revolution in France on our own doorstep?

'The same.'

'But Elliott! How . . . how *can* you? I declare I think you've lost your senses. He has been starting a strange new society called Friends of the People who've been aiding the revolutionaries in France. He wants to give everyone the right to vote in this country, and he would set up Madame Guillotine in the streets of Edinburgh if he dared. Why, there are all sorts of tales whispered about! I heard about a woman who chops the heads off her hens in the back garden in preparation for what she will do when the Revolution is in our own midst.'

'Oh sister, your tongue rattles at both ends,' laughed Elliott. 'I have known Thomas Muir for years. Perhaps I do him a favour, and perhaps he returns that favour. Do I care for ethics? I have a task to undertake and any means by which I may accomplish it, I will use. If Thomas Muir can help it, so be it. He wishes me to undertake a commission for him in Paris.'

'Edmund Burke has much more the right of it. He says that the Revolution has gone too far. Perhaps the common people *were* oppressed, but the country has been made lawless and the common people are no better off. Where once they hungered, now they starve.'

'That is why I have to go there, my dear Anne,' said Elliott, his black eyes glittering.

'I do not like it when you play a double game,' said Lady Anne.

'Nor do I,' said a voice at the long french window which led onto the terrace. 'If you work with the . . . the scum which has slaughtered the finest of our people and shamed us to the world, then I can no longer accept your hospitality, Monsieur Elliott.'

André, white and trembling, walked into the room. He and Jasmine had been walking along the terrace, but Elliott's voice had reached them clearly, and he had sat down abruptly on a wooden seat, his face very pale as he dug his fingers into her arm so that it was now bruised. She had no compunction at listening to other people's conversation, and though André might have made his presence known had it been on some other subject, he had no compunction either at listening when he heard Thomas Muir being mentioned.

Now Jasmine remained on the seat where André had pressed her arm, bidding her to stay there. She was glad not to draw attention to herself, realizing that tempers were rising. For herself she had little idea as to the true nature of the discussion. She knew about the Revolution in France, but had little notion as to its repercussions in Scotland or England.

'The Scots have too little say in the government of their country,' Elliott declared, 'though I do not advocate a Revolution such as has taken place in France. The ignorant gain power and are corrupted by it, and the weak still suffer.'

'Yet you would aid the new régime,' said André contemptuously. 'For that I would call you out, if my body were not so weak.'

'You've done enough fighting, my lad,' said Elliott cheerfully. 'Oh, don't be so hot-headed, André. If I must travel through France, I need papers, and if I must take the Crystal Heart to your parents, I need a good cover. If I don't help Thomas, someone else will undertake the commission. It might as well be me, and it gives me a much better chance of safe conduct. He'll supply me with papers as good as any I could get, and they will be genuine, not forged. I have not forgotten my last trip

into your proud territory.'

His glance was meaningful and André flushed.

'I am grateful to you for my life,' he said stiffly, 'but my life is worthless at the expense of my honour.'

'I do not harm your honour,' said Elliott. 'It is all yours. You may value it all you like—but weigh it against the fate of your mother and sister.'

There was a heavy silence, then André's voice came, high and trembling.

'Take care that you do not exceed the bonds of friendship, my friend. But you are right, damn you. I must think of those who are dear to me.'

'You ought to go and rest now, André,' said Lady Anne kindly.

'And Mademoiselle Big-Ears should come in from the terrace,' said Elliott in a loud voice. 'How she loves to listen at keyholes, and peep behind the curtains. She will tell our fortunes next. "A tall dark man will call on you and ask for favours." Is that how it is done, the gypsy lore?'

Jasmine appeared at the door, her face white. 'I did not wish to intrude,' she said with dignity.

'No, you might have been packed off to bed and you would have missed such a lot, would you not?'

She shook her head. 'It means nothing to me.'

Elliott gave a shout of laughter. 'I believe you. Just fancy, sister—a female who does not try to take an interest in politics in order to show that her mind is equal to that of a man. Isn't she unique?'

Lady Anne, who had always taken an interest in political matters, did not reply.

'Go to bed, child,' she said to Jasmine. 'It grows cold in the evenings and you have no shawl.'

'Yes, my lady,' said Jasmine and was glad to escape to

her room. Elliott's words often hurt her deeply and he always seemed to be reassuring himself that she was a very low standard of human being.

Sometimes he acted as though he hated her, and sometimes his eyes followed her with the peculiar male hungry look which she now recognized as desire.

A few days later a tall gentleman in a dark velvet riding coat, white nankeens and his hair neatly queued, rode into Glenlacie and was offered hospitality for a day and a night. Jasmine was locked into her room and André, too, kept well away from the important guest.

Jasmine heard the low murmur of their voices from the room underneath, but her window was again tightly closed after a severe thunderstorm two nights before, and the windows of the room below also remained shut.

André was in a black humour after the gentleman left, but Elliott had shed all his glowering looks. The gypsy caravan now appeared in the yard, whilst he and Lachie packed it full of necessities for a long journey. The caravan had been cleverly adapted to make a small private room and there were also sealed partitions where goods could be packed well out of sight. A cupboard had been made for Jasmine's clothes, and a stout box to hold her dancing costume when it was not in use.

'We cannot make another on the way,' he told Jasmine when he showed her round the caravan. 'Your dancing costume has cost me several golden guineas and I will see that it is taken care of.'

'You mean I must travel in the verdo—the caravan—and dance for you as I danced for Judd and Rima?' asked Jasmine.

'But of course,' said Elliott, his eyes gleaming. 'Have I

not explained this to you? I thought you understood why I bought you.'

'But . . . why?' she asked.

'Because I say so,' he told her softly. 'Because I say so, my dancing doll.'

CHAPTER SIX

She was going to France.

Jasmine stormed and wept as she realized that she was going to another country where Miall may not be able to find her. She had heard snatches of conversation and she had known that the master wanted her to dance for him, but she had imagined that guests would be invited to come to Glenlacie to watch. She had not understood that the caravan was meant for travelling until Elliott showed it to her.

Also, she was going alone with Elliott and Lachie. There would be no Lady Anne to stand between her and the master's anger, nor would there be Meg Balfour to wipe her tears. And if Miall tried to follow them and the master caught him, something terrible might happen—he might hang both her and Miall from the nearest tree! And if he wanted to lie with her, there would be nothing to stop him, and he would only give her pain and humiliation instead of love and gentleness.

On the previous evening the dancing dress had been finished and Elliott had asked her to put it on and to dance for them in the great hall.

The dress was heavy to wear, the bodice being made of scarlet silk heavily embroidered with gold thread. The neckline was cut low to show off Jasmine's firm young

breasts. There were flounces upon flounces of scarlet silk falling from the waistline to her ankles and the skirt was wide and cleverly cut to show off Jasmine's slender legs and beautifully rounded hips to the best advantage.

A piece of the scarlet silk had been well padded and fashioned into a band which fitted round Jasmine's small head. The band was broad above her forehead, then narrowed to an inch in width behind each ear. Scarlet ribbon had been sewn on to each narrow part and Jasmine could tie the head-dress firmly in place with the ribbons, underneath her long hair so that it would remain in place whilst she danced.

On the front of the head-dress seven circles of brilliants had been sewn, the largest in the centre and the smallest above each ear. To enhance the brilliants, the remainder of the head-dress was covered with flowers of gold and silver embroidery, the petals fashioned of small colourful beads and pearls. In the centre of the main circle of brilliants, the largest of these stones glowed with a fire of its own.

Elliott had also ordered a colourful gypsy costume for himself. When Jasmine first saw him wearing it, she forgot that she hated him and collapsed with laughter at the sight of his tall figure clothed so incongruously. He had purchased a tambourine and he insisted that they practise her dances to his accompaniment.

'Why so merry?' he demanded. 'Not that it is not more welcome than the sulks. I like your laughter, Jasmine.'

'You look so . . . so funny,' she gasped. 'You try to look like a gypsy, but you are not at all like Judd or . . . or anyone else,' she finished lamely.

'I'm like the sort of gypsy that the crowds expect to see,' he told her. 'They think of gypsies as a colourful race, full of laughter and music and with the hint of mystery and the

all-seeing-eye which commands respect and admiration. They do not see the sloth and the dirt and the greed and the dishonesty. That's your gypsy for you.'

'They have their own honour,' Jasmine said quietly.

'Change into your dancing dress with no more argument,' he commanded. 'We will go and dance for Lady Anne and André, and the men and maidservants. If they find us amusing, then the crowds will also watch.'

Marion Simpson helped Jasmine to put on the costume and head-dress. It was a beautiful piece of work. The gold embroidery was very fine and brilliants flashed at every turn.

Jasmine had not danced for some time and she began to twist and turn almost reluctantly, but soon the rhythm caught at her heart and her feet obeyed the message of the tambourine whether she willed them or not. She knew that of all things her dancing was her greatest talent. It came to her as naturally as breathing, and soon she was setting the rhythm with a clap of her hands whilst her body swayed this way and that.

Then the tempo quickened at a signal from her snapping fingers and her body became a vibrant sensuous figure of breathtaking beauty as she begun to turn wildly, her hair streaming out from the jewelled head-dress which sparkled and dazzled as it caught the light from the many candles in the chandeliers.

The watchers found themselves beating time to her rhythm, their senses stirring with excitement as they watched her dart and twist like a firefly. Then the rhythm grew slower and her movements slowed and grew languorous until she finished off with a great flurry of skirts.

André applauded wildly whilst Lady Anne also joined in the applause and the servants cheered and shouted

their praise. Only Meg was restrained, her warm wholesome face sad and withdrawn. Her little lady had become a gypsy again; a strange being from a different race. It was as though she had been given a changeling child to care for.

For a long moment Elliott stood looking at Jasmine with fire in his eyes. Then the spell was broken, and as the applause rang out, he began to laugh, well pleased.

'No one can teach Gypsy Jasmine how to dance,' he said. 'You were born to dance, my dear. You are like a being from another world when your toes obey the tambourine.'

'I'm out of practice,' she gasped, her breast heaving.

'You shall have plenty of that. Did I do well on the tambourine?'

'Very well, but you too need practice.'

Elliott looked put out. He had been rather proud of his performance.

'I *have* been practising, away from the house. I did not wish to make a cake of myself. I see that you no longer laugh at my costume.'

'I've grown used to it,' she said. 'You're not like a gypsy, but perhaps you're like an entertainer, a clown.'

'A clown!' he cried, and there was mischief in her eyes. How easy it would all be if he was always as light and airy.

But the entertainment was over, even though the women looked at Jasmine with envy, and Lady Anne, too, grew quiet.

'The dancing costume becomes you,' she told Jasmine after Marion had removed it. 'Take care, though. You're growing up, child.'

'I *like* being grown up,' said Jasmine, then remembered a part of it she had not liked. But that was all behind her now.

It was on the next day that she learned she was going to France.

'I won't go!' cried Jasmine, when she realized just what was in store for her. 'The gypsies don't like France. Judd and Rima didn't travel to France and I have never been there. The people set up guillotines to rid themselves of friends they don't like as well as enemies of the people. Even young ladies have lost their heads. And sometimes people don't like gypsy dancers, because they don't understand them. They . . . they might put me to the guillotine.'

'You'll be quite safe,' said Elliott absently, his mind on other things. There was much he had to arrange with his steward before they left. Glenlacie was a big estate, and well run, but only because Elliott took a great deal of the responsibility into his own hands and usually left detailed instructions as to what was required to be done in his absence.

Lady Anne had agreed to prolong her stay at Glenlacie so that she could keep an eye on André, and see that he did not overtax his strength now that he was convalescing. He was still inclined to be sulky, not entirely convinced that Elliott should be doing errands for Thomas Muir, who was so clearly a friend to the Republic.

'He is one of the blues,' he said scornfully, 'but *I* am proud to wear the white cockade. He should be put to the sword before he stirs up your country and makes it a desert like my poor beautiful France.'

'He will be silenced, but not through violence,' said Elliott amiably. 'The people are not so unreasonable.'

'People everywhere can be stirred up by madmen.'

'He has not enough support to make his voice heard,' said Elliott. 'True, some of the people have been in sympathy with the Republicans—especially in Glasgow

where I hear that £1,400 has been raised to help the French common people—but opinion is becoming divided. We see the mistakes being made in France and we have no stomach for the bloodshed which the Revolution has produced. Now be easy, André, and allow me to do what is best for us. I think your parents and Anne-Marie will be best served at Glenlacie, and we'll try to do the best for Madame your mother's health. She needs sunshine, I know, and a dry climate, but Glenlacie is better than the Terror for her. I hope to get her through France in a leisurely fashion so that she isn't made ill by the journey; hence this elaborate charade. Sometimes it is the spectacular in life which is most safe. It's believed that one does not flaunt one's secrets.'

'Ah, Elliott, you are my very best friend and brother,' said André rather wearily. 'I will leave it to you to care for my mother and sister. My father grows old, and I have lost my strength with these wounds which make a cripple of me. I can only be happy that we still have the Crystal Heart, and much can be bought with it. Other jewels and paintings and precious objects have already fallen into the greedy hands of the Republicans, and they will certainly know of the existence of our diamond. Take care that they do not learn it is in your possession, Elliott. If there has to be a choice between your life and the diamond, or even if Miss Jasmine's life is in danger because of it, then throw it to the dogs. It is not worth more lives. Already many have been lost in the possession of it.'

'It will be returned where it belongs, André, never fear,' said Elliott, and André nodded then retired into the shadows whilst the final preparations were made. Elliott was glad of this as he coped with the thousand and one things he had to do, and now he was in no mood to cope with tantrums from Jasmine.

'A short while ago you whined about being kept indoors and you shouted and screamed about a gypsy being locked up, likening yourself to a wild bird in a cage. Now you cavil because you are once again going back to your old life, except that you'll be much more comfortable and will have *my* protection instead of that of an old man and woman. I'm an excellent shot and I trained at the best fencing academy in London. *Now* are you satisfied?'

'Gypsies do not buckle on swords.'

'No, but there is a great deal more in our caravan than meets the eye. That is why it has taken so long for us to prepare for the journey. And anyway—' he looked askance at her—'I would not have thought you such a milksop. I remember other occasions when I saw a bit of fire in you instead of all this moaning and groaning. I wouldn't have thought you so craven before a few Frenchmen. Why, to be sure, I would have expected you to turn them into soft clay in your hands by offering them sweet kisses. I've seen how you deal with Frenchmen.'

Jasmine's face grew scarlet and her eyes blazed with anger, and not a little embarrassment. In truth, she had not cared a great deal whether they travelled in France or not, since gypsies were used to travelling in whatever country took their fancy. But she had been afraid that if they crossed to the Continent she would lose Miall.

Miall wanted her, and his stubborn gypsy nature would keep him hanging about in the vicinity, waiting for her and hoping she had been able to found their fortunes with one or two stolen treasures. She was not sure if his desire for her was strong enough to make him cross water, unless it was on a ship which carried both of them to a new life in America. But to cross to France without certainty of reward was another matter, and Jasmine did not want to lose Miall. She had found him rough and uncouth, after

being used to Elliott's fastidious manners, but Miall was one of her own kind. She was a real person to Miall, not just another possession.

She had no defence to offer as Elliott threw his scathing comments at her. She caught a gleam almost of laughter in his eyes, as though he could see through her small pretences, and she blushed anew with shame and mortification. She could not be clever with Elliott, since he would always outwit her. She could only take each day as it came, and await her opportunity to flee.

She pondered about his purpose in visiting France and turned over in her mind what she had gleaned from listening at doors and in the shadows when Elliott forgot she was nearby. Somewhere he had a cache of gold which he was taking to a representative of the Republicans in Paris—gold raised by the efforts of Thomas Muir.

But Elliott was also going to find André's parents and sister, who was destined to become Mistress of Glenlacie, and those people must be smuggled out of France, no doubt posing as gypsies in the verdo. He would be depending upon her to make the travelling gypsies appear genuine to curious eyes, since she was a genuine gypsy dancer, and the suspicions of anyone would be lulled as soon as she started to dance.

Jasmine's eyes crinkled when she went to look at the smartened verdo.

'Do you expect people to believe that you are a real gypsy?' she asked Elliott.

'Why not? It's a Romany caravan.'

The verdo had been painted scarlet with scrolls of gold leaves and flowers dividing each side into three panels. An artist had been at work on each centre panel and on the black door, painting rural scenes of horses gently grazing in a field behind a small wooden gate. Jasmine's

eyes danced with laughter when she saw it. Elliott must have admired the finest of the gypsy verdos and had decided to have his own painted in a similar fashion.

‘It indicates that you trade in horses,’ she said, ‘and you should not have such a passion for scrubbing it all clean. You will have to make friends with dirt and sweat! And your hands, and mine, are much too soft and white. Have you ever seen a gypsy with the hands of a gaujo gentleman?’

‘That is why we take our time travelling through England, my little bird,’ he said with a smile. ‘A few days on the road and the natural order of things will take care of that. I’m sure you must have missed all the dirt and stench and will welcome them back again.’

She flushed angrily. In fact, her one delight in her new situation was the absence of dirt, and the pleasure she took in her clean body.

‘I was only trying to point out the pitfalls to you,’ she said, and his eyes softened.

‘Thank you. It is one which I had foreseen and which I thought could be overcome as I have told you, but there may be others. Jasmine . . .’ He took her by the shoulders. ‘This journey is very important to me. If you help me, then you will not find me ungrateful. We will talk about your future life when we return, and if you are a good girl, then we’ll do what is best to ensure your happiness in the future.’

Tears stung her eyelids at the kindness in his voice. ‘I will do my best,’ she said huskily, and felt the warmth of his lips on hers with a gentle kiss. He pulled her closer and the kiss became fierce and demanding. Jasmine’s heart began to pound and strange thrills of excitement shook her whole body so that she trembled in his arms. Suddenly he pushed her away and his eyes seemed to see into her

very soul. She felt as though their spirits had moved together onto another plane. Then the spell was broken.

'Go and see if you can help Meg,' he told her roughly. 'She has much to do with packing provisions. Don't pester me, girl. We have a long way to go together.'

Her knees still trembling, Jasmine ran to do his bidding.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There had been a spell of wet weather, but the full heat of summer was now upon them as they set off two days later in the gypsy caravan, pulled by the fine strong horse, which Elliott had bought at Appleby Fair. Lachie rode beside them on another horse, with bags of provisions strapped to his saddle.

Lady Anne and André had waved them away with tears in their eyes. Meg had hugged Jasmine to her, and even Lady Anne and André had kissed her cheek. Suddenly there was a lump in Jasmine's throat as they began to leave Glenlacie behind. It had been her prison and so many times she had declared that she hated it, but now she knew that she had come to love it as she had loved nowhere else. It was the first time she had ever known a settled home, and in a queer sort of way, Lady Anne, André and Meg had become almost like her own family.

She looked at Elliott who was grim-faced. He wore breeches and an open-necked shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a bright scarf tied round his neck. In a day or two, when the sun and wind had done its work, he would look more like a gypsy.

At Elliott's request, Lady Anne had found her old dark garden cloak for Jasmine, but now she was wearing the first dress Marion Simpson had made for her. It was in a

drab colour and soon it too would be nondescript, and her shiny hair would grow more tangled. Her dancing costume was kept in the special box in the caravan, and was locked away. Elliott repeatedly impressed upon her the fact that it was the only dancing dress she would have, and that she must therefore take great care of it and they had a long way to go.

They were travelling east towards Dumfries and Annan, and they would thence move south through Carlisle. Elliott decided that Jasmine should first perform at Dumfries in order to have good practice, and that Lachie should collect pennies in his cap as Judd had done. Elliott himself would play the tambourine and shout encouragement to the people, inviting them to come and watch.

Jasmine had the small room in the caravan to herself, whilst Elliott had a folding bed in the main living quarters. Lachie preferred to camp outside, to keep an eye on the animals, except for when the weather was too wet.

Lachie was a quiet stoic of a man who enjoyed the nomadic life, and he confided to Jasmine that his people had been tinkers. Elliott's father had found him being ill-treated when he was still only a boy, and had rescued him and given him a home and a job to do in the stables.

'I looked after Master Elliott when he was a wee lad,' Lachie said, 'and I'd lay down my life for him. He can be wild and thrawn at times, but what gentleman isn't? But he's a good man and he has always looked after me, like his father afore him. I'll see that no Frenchie lays a hand on the master, even if I do think he's lost his reason for venturing to that Godless country in the first place.'

Jasmine's cooking had improved after helping out in the kitchens at Glenlacie on one or two occasions, and they had extra provisions to help out the game which Lachie and Elliott provided.

She had already noticed the signs that told her Miall was not far away. She often stood very still, listening to the woodland noises and hearing the false note of a bird or animal which conveyed to her the private messages she alone could understand.

But this time she made no answering signals. She had nothing to give Miall to help him raise money for them both. She would help the master with this undertaking, for he had promised to reward her. Then, with the gold that Elliott would give her, she and Miall would not need to hide and start in fear at every turn in case the law caught up with them before they were safe.

On the evening when they camped a mile or two from Dumfries, Elliott was in an expansive mood after they had eaten a fine stew and had drunk good refreshing ale. His arms and neck had grown brown and his swarthy face was now burnt almost as black as any gypsy's.

'Tomorrow you will dance for the people of Dumfries, Jasmine,' he told her. 'We will see whether or not we are accepted as true gypsies before we travel into England. I want us to feel as though we really *are* gypsies . . . easy for you, my dear, but Lachie and I are novices.'

'Just yoursel', Master Elliott,' said Lachie, his small black eyes gleaming. 'I've lived the life afore. It comes natural again in no time. We were travelling tinkers once and I believe my grandfather came out of Ireland.'

It was not coming so natural again to Jasmine. She was beginning to long for Meg's warm bath and the relaxation of hot water, but she knew that it was necessary to have the open-air look common to all voyagers.

Their first effort at attracting crowds to entertain was not as successful as it might have been. The weather had dulled again and the hurrying people were in no mood to linger. Elliott had grown quiet and stiff and Jasmine

realized that he was selfconscious in the role he had set himself to play. His rhythm on the tambourine became disjointed in places and she missed a few beats and faltered in her steps. The curious looked on, but her bizarre costume seemed ridiculous in their drab surroundings.

'It will be better when we have had more practice,' said Elliott, as they moved on much earlier than they had anticipated.

'It's too fresh and new,' said Jasmine. 'My costume, I mean. It doesn't look right.'

'Then wear it until nightfall,' he advised. 'Allow the smoke from the fire to dull it a little whilst you cook the meal. Lachie and I will rest. We are unused to the life of entertaining. You are not, so you can do the necessary chores yourself, Jasmine.'

She could see that his temper was not at its best and once again he was dismissing her as he would flick an insect from his wrist. Her eyes smouldered with resentment as she began to cook the remains of the game which Lachie had provided.

She left the pot simmering on a tripod over the wood fire and wandered into the woods to look for herbs to flavour the meat. It was venison, hard and tough for lack of fat unless it was well cooked with fine flavouring.

As she came to a clearing, she was startled by the call of a screech-owl, her eyes darting about until Miall stepped from behind a tree, and ran forward to greet her.

'How did ye come by such a dancing dress?' he asked. 'Ye are as colourful as a parrot.'

His rough gypsy tongue sounded strange to her ears.

'The master had it made for me,' she told him. 'Miall, he isn't far away. He would beat me if he saw me talking to you, and he would put the law on you.'

'It's worth the risk,' he said softly, taking her into his arms and kissing her passionately. 'I've lived in the woods and waited for ye for days. Why didn't ye come?'

'The master is a devil. He *knew* you wanted me to steal things from the house at Glenlacie, and he said he would put us both in prison if anything went missing. And anyway, I can't steal, Miall. There is something which sticks in me against it.'

'Did ye see me watching you dancing?' he asked, his eyes alight. 'Jasmine, I've kept one or two of my father's horses and we could ride for Liverpool. Don't go back now. That dancing costume could be sold there. When we've earned enough money to pay passage for both of us, we can be on our way to America. Don't go back to him, Jasmine. What does he want with ye, anyway? And why is he trying to live like a gypsy? He has no notion of the life, no notion of our culture or what gives pleasure in our journeying. Surely he must be a fool!'

'He is not a fool, Miall. We travel as we do because he is going to France to bring back a family of nobles, one of them his wife-to-be. It is hard to get people out of France and to escape the guillotine. It is a crime to be born noble in France.'

'That's why the gypsies are quite safe,' said Miall drily. 'They think we are nobodies, yet our culture goes back many centuries. I spit on them!'

He suited his actions to his words and Jasmine showed her revulsion.

'Ye've grown too fine—like a gaujo!' he sneered. 'Ye want to be one of them.'

'No, Miall! There is no love for me in their lives, but the master has promised that if I help him in his venture, I will go free—with a reward.'

'What reward?'

'I don't know, but he will be generous. He keeps his word.'

'But ye might be gone for many days. It's a long journey to France.'

He looked at her glowing like a jewel in her brightly embroidered costume. She was far more beautiful now than he could have ever believed. He seized her hand.

'Come on Jasmine. We'll take this path—'

'You will take *no* path!'

Jasmine's face paled and she saw the trepidation on Miall's face as he turned and confronted Elliott who was pointing a pistol at Miall's head.

'I should have the law on you, gypsy. If it were not for the fact that I have work to do, and no time to lose, I would shoot you now. But questions would be asked and I could be detained in answering them. But if I catch you trying to steal this woman from me, I shall not hesitate to blast you to Hell. The woman is mine. I bought her for gold. Now, be off and don't let me see signs of you again.'

Miall stared at him defiantly for a few long moments, and Jasmine hardly dared to breathe, knowing that the black anger in the Master of Glenlacie was very real. He had been in just such a mood when he ravished her so that her body was left torn and bleeding.

Her eyes signalled Miall to go immediately and with reluctance he swaggered off down the path he had previously indicated. Elliott watched him go, then turned to Jasmine.

'If you ever leave the precincts of the camp to lie with your gypsy friends and you are still wearing the dancing costume which has taken many weeks to make for you, I shall flail you. I might even take a dagger to your face, then you won't be half so attractive to your lovers. As it is, I'm going to teach you a lesson you will not forget.'

He pushed and shoved her back to the caravan where Lachie was pouring more water into the stew which had boiled dry. His face was impassive and he avoided looking at Jasmine.

In the caravan Elliott made her remove the precious costume, then he pulled off her underclothes and beat her with a thonged whip about the buttocks. She tried not to cry out, but soon she was sobbing with pain.

'Perhaps that will make you remember,' he panted, then turned her over and a moment later he was undressing, pulling at his own clothing as though it burned his flesh. She could feel the touch of his hands on her skin and she shivered with ecstasy she did not want to acknowledge as she saw the satin smoothness of his skin, even as he pressed down on her. Almost instinctively she moved in order to receive him, but in his rage he was soon finished with her. Again he left her feeling bewildered and frustrated and desiring something which had been within her grasp, but which had been denied her.

When he rose to his feet, she lay sobbing into her pillow.

'You can do without food and maybe some punishment will teach you a few lessons.'

'Beast!' she choked. 'You cannot punish me in this way! You punish my body, but you cannot make me respect you—or fear you. You can only make me hate and loathe you! I don't care if I go hungry, or thirsty. I . . . I don't care about anything!'

Her tears were sparkling like diamonds on her cheeks and her eyes were large and brilliant as she spat the words at him. Once again he began to feel his anger drain from him, and amusement lit his eyes as he regarded her as he would a small spitting cat.

'Put your costume away, Jasmine. It's crumpled.'

'Perhaps I will not look so much like a . . . a parrot,' she said.

There was a bowl and a pitcher of water in her room and she rinsed her face, wiping away the traces of tears, then washed her tender body where he had beaten her and taken her so violently. This time she had not been badly hurt, but neither had she experienced any elusive excitement. Her own anger at his treatment of her had banished any finer feelings.

She found the herbal ointment which Rima had taught her how to make and often used herself as a remedy to ease the bruises after Judd had lashed out in a drunken rage, and soon Jasmine began to feel better.

There was a faint tap at the door and Lachie's voice came clearly.

'Are ye there, Miss Jasmine? I've got a wee bite for ye here, lassie.'

'Oh, Lachie! The master has punished me. I mustn't have any food.'

'He's awa' walking off his ill humour. Have this wee bite. It will give ye a bit o' strength.'

She opened the door and he gave her a steaming plate of venison stew. After a second's hesitation, she ate it ravenously, then returned the plate to Lachie.

'He's a hard man is the master,' he whispered, 'but he won't stay angry with ye for long. He thought ye had run away and all his work would come to nought. He beat at ye with the fright of it.'

'If he beats me again, I *will* run away,' she said grimly.

'No, ye must help him. Your day will come and he'll not be ungenerous. He will see ye all right.'

'Perhaps.'

'Do ye feel better now, lass?'

'Yes, thank you, Lachie.'

'Rest a while then. He'll be over his temper when he returns.'

Jasmine lay on her bed and soon her lids dropped in sleep. Then suddenly she was wide awake as the pale ghostly moonlight lit up her room in the caravan and she sensed a movement near the door.

'Don't be alarmed,' said Elliott in a low voice. 'I've only come to see if you are all right.'

'I am all right,' she said evenly, and watched his dark shape as he came to stand beside her bed, looking down on her.

She pulled the bedclothes up to her chin, aware that she had undressed completely in order to soothe her wounds with ointment. A moment later he had knelt beside her and stayed her hand.

'You look like an enchanted child in the moonlight,' he said softly. 'I should not have hurt you as I did.'

'My body is used to hurts,' she said.

He lay down beside her and caressed her beautiful hair with his long fingers.

'You have never been taken in love, Jasmine?'

'Why ask me such a question? *You* are the only one who has ever despoiled me, and you have only touched me in anger.'

'Now I touch you in love,' he said softly. 'On such a night, we two should learn that there can be great sweetness between a man and a maid.'

'There can be no sweetness between a master and his bought slave. If you want me, I have no choice but to allow you to take me.'

Her body was as cold and rigid as marble, but he began to kiss her pale lips until the warmth of his own spread through her, and she began to shake. He pulled off his shirt and breeches and stood naked in the moonlight, so

that he looked so beautiful as an angel and she forgot that she had ever thought of him as a devil.

She could see the white satiny texture of his skin and his maleness was a wonder to her so that she reached out to touch him as he lay down beside her and gathered her soft body into his arms.

'Can't you feel a softness for me now?' he asked as his hands caressed her thighs and the soft skin at the top of her legs. Slowly the ice round her heart was beginning to melt; once again her heart began to pound and her body tingled with that elusive excitement which she had almost experienced the first time.

She could feel that he had grown hard beside her, but this time he pulled her gently towards him, and this time she could feel no hurt as they were joined in love. This time her passion began to meet his own so that she understood many things which had puzzled her in the past. She understood why Rima sometimes welcomed Judd and did not repulse him. But surely Judd could never have been so gentle and at the same time so masterful as Elliott! He was rousing pleasure in her body such as she had never believed existed, a pleasure and passion which broke from her like the warm spray of the ocean on a heavenly day.

'Now I have taken you in love,' said Elliott in her ear, 'and you have learned what it is to be a woman, even if you are still a child.'

'I'm a *woman*!' she said, tears again sparkling in her eyes, though this time they were tears of happiness. Tomorrow would be a new day, but tonight was hers. 'I am near sixteen years. I was a child when Judd and Rima found me and they thought I was perhaps five years old, but I could have been six.'

'Where did they find you?'

'It was an accident. Rima said my parents were killed in an accident, and no one claimed me, so Judd and Rima brought me up as their own child.'

'Then you are not true gypsy?' asked Elliott.

'No one knows. Sometimes I have strange dreams and I'm afraid, but I don't know who I am. I just know that I could not have been important when no one claimed me, so I was proud to be a gypsy. I can dance like a gypsy, but I cannot *pen baji*—tell fortunes. The other things I have learned from Rima.'

He was silent for a while. 'Perhaps that's why they sold you to me, since you are not their own flesh and blood.'

She nodded. 'The gypsies would not sell their own children. They love children.'

'Ah well, you belong to me now,' he told her, pulling her against him once more.

'Until you find Anne-Marie.'

Jasmine immediately knew she had made a mistake. She heard the hiss of his indrawn breath and felt the stiffening of his body.

'I presume you refer to Mademoiselle de Castillon-Cazals,' he said at length, his voice tinkling like an icicle.

'I don't know her proper name.'

'You don't know anything about her, so you will please not mention her name to me. I do not discuss Mademoiselle de Castillon-Cazals with you.'

'Because she is human whilst *I* am only a toy, a plaything, a bought possession,' she said furiously. 'Why did you not buy a puppet, carved out of wood, with arms and legs tied as with string? But of course. I forgot. You could not make love to a wooden puppet. You need the warmth of flesh and blood outside, but the wooden puppet inside. Is that what you want?'

He had quickly pulled on his clothing and now he

towered over her, his dark face lit by moonlight.

'Be quiet!' he hissed. 'You have the makings of a shrew, with your gypsy rantings and ravings. I told you before—you are mine! I bought you and I can do as I wish with you. You will not find me a cruel man if you behave and conduct yourself with decorum, but I will not have you discussing a certain lady. Is that understood, or must I whip you again?'

'If you do, I shall be unable to dance,' she said defiantly. 'I thought you had bought a *dancer*, not a girl to pleasure you.'

'I bought a dancer, not a talking bird. Now get some sleep. It will soon be dawn.'

Jasmine was too angry for sleep and she beat the pillows and told herself over and over again that she hated the man who owned her. But deep down she knew that she was falling in love with him. The hour of happiness she had just spent with him was the most wonderful of her whole life. If only she had been as well-born as Anne-Marie! If only he saw her as a young lady to be admired and respected, instead of a gypsy dancer to be exploited in whatever capacity he saw fit!

But she *was* only a gypsy. Perhaps she ought to be grateful for whatever crumbs came her way. But as she slept at last, Jasmine knew that it was her nature never to accept second best. Somehow she would make Elliott Maxwell-Ferguson forget Anne-Marie. Somehow she would make him see her as the only woman he ever wanted in his life. She had been taken by this man and the only honourable life ahead for her was to belong to him and he to her in faithful love. He had despoiled her for anyone else.

But how she could accomplish this, she had not the least idea.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elliott had grown cold and he brooded a great deal after the night he had spent with Jasmine. There was no longer any gaiety in him as he played the tambourine for her to dance before the crowds which gathered at each town through which they were passing. They were becoming well-known and Jasmine heard whispers amongst the on-lookers that she was the gypsy who had danced in Carlisle, or Penrith, or Kendal, and she knew that their fame was beginning to spread. Surely this was what Elliott had wanted. They were becoming accepted as genuine gypsy entertainers, and with traffic still moving between England and France, they were sure to be accepted there as well.

Lachie was well pleased with the coins which found their way into his cap and even claimed that their expedition might pay its own way.

'We are too slow,' said Elliott one evening as they rested in a woodland area near Chester. 'We've made our point. Now we must proceed without stopping for Jasmine to dance in every town.'

'Won't that make people suspicious?' asked Jasmine.

She had been enjoying their journey and was settling down to the happiest period in her life so far. Elliott was morose but he never flew into a rage with her; and for her part, the daily routine of dancing and looking after their

comforts was very satisfying. Although Elliott now stayed away from her at night, Jasmine felt as though she were wife to him since she tended his every need and washed his clothing, mending it neatly and lovingly.

Her only concern had been that Miall still lurked in the shadows and she knew that by now he was probably in an evil mood. Elliott had forced him to slink away like a whipped cur, but Jasmine knew his character well enough to feel sure he was only biding his time. He considered that she was his woman; he would not rest until he had snatched her back from Elliott. Somehow she would have to let Miall know that she was no longer willing to be his wife, that the master had made her his own.

Only once had she stirred Elliott again since she had shaken him by reminding him about Anne-Marie. In the cool of evening, after a warm dusty day, she had bathed in a clear sparkling brook, then she had worn her shift and danced in a meadow full of buttercups as the sun slowly sank to its nadir.

Suddenly Elliott was there, watching her from the shelter of the trees and as she ran towards him like a wood nymph, he caught her in his arms and kissed her with passion. But although she knew he desired her and thirsted after her, and his body felt like a rod of steel as she leaned against him, he had not taken her. He was determined to repulse her for Anne-Marie, she thought furiously.

But as they started to make quicker progress towards the south coast, she began to hope desperately that he would come to need her again with a fierceness he was unable to resist. What would happen when they reached France? She imagined that bands of soldiers would be hiding in every wood, ready to leap out and cut them to ribbons if they did not support their own particular

allegiance. And Elliott would be single-minded in his determination to find Anne-Marie and get her back to Glenlacie. Jasmine imagined a female version of André at ease in the fine drawing room, entertaining the friends who would gather to fawn upon her.

She remembered a gypsy love incantation and in the evening she slipped out into the woods and picked a blade of grass. Putting it in her mouth she turned first to the east, then to the west, chanting:

*'Kay o kám, avriável,
Kiya mange lele beshel!
Kay o kám tel' ável,
Kiya lelákri me beshav.'*

Then she chopped the blade of grass finely and mixed it with Elliott's food. If he ate it, then he must surely forget Anne-Marie and turn to her sooner or later.

But Elliott's appetite was poor that evening, and he found a small piece of grass in his food.

'What's this?' he asked, removing it from his mouth. 'For God's sake, Jasmine, haven't you learned yet how to keep your cooking pots clean?'

He threw the offending food behind a bush and Jasmine's heart felt hollow as she cut him some bread and cheese. The charm had not been given the chance to work, and Elliott was further out of tune with her than ever.

Jasmine hated the sea. She was a woodland creature, rejoicing in the plants and herbs which grew out of every nook and cranny, ready to make friends with all the wild creatures—even though she was equally ready to cook the game which had been slaughtered for food, or the hedge-

hog which she wrapped in clay and cooked on the embers of the fire.

Near Canterbury she had suddenly become sickly and feverish, crying out with nightmares in the night, and sobbing into Elliott's shoulder when he came to pick her up like a child. He would have stayed in her bed had she not been feverish and ill, but instead he bade Lachie rekindle the fire to boil up some herb tea which she had taught him how to make.

'It . . . it was all black,' she said through chattering teeth, 'and there was a loud noise and . . . and it all fell on top of me. I saw some people—a man and a lady . . . They were dead! I had to crawl out, I had to get out . . . And then there was no one but me and I was all alone. There was no one, no one but me!'

'Hush now, little Jasmine,' Elliott said tenderly, his hand on her hot forehead. 'You've got me. You're not alone any more. Here, child, drink this to quiet you.'

He held out a cup to her lips and she drank thirstily, then he settled her down again.

'She's caught a chill, Lachie. She must rest for a day or two.'

But as they proceeded south, the fever having quickly left Jasmine, she soon forgot her bad dreams.

'I have overslept,' she said to Elliott next day when he brought her something to eat. 'Shall we be coming to a town soon? Will you wish me to dance?'

'You'll dance no more until we reach France,' he told her. '*Then* you'll dance, and we'll be gay gypsies again. We must be neutrals if we are to travel freely, though I shall earn safe conduct for us. I have papers which will get us to France, then we must travel to Paris and onwards south. But that's in the future. We must take each day as it comes.'

'It's dangerous in France,' said Jasmine bleakly.

She would lose Elliott for ever after Anne-Marie put her hand in his. It would seem as though her own life was over.

'There is danger everywhere in this life,' said Elliott. 'A wasp could sting the horse, causing it to bolt and overturn the caravan, and we could have our heads cracked open. It happens.'

'Don't!' cried Jasmine, her eyes suddenly terrified. There was no fear in her for France, but something in Elliott's lightly spoken words about the bolting horse struck terror into her heart.

'Come now, you're made of sterner stuff, Jasmine. Why so craven?'

'I am *not* craven!' she cried. 'But some things . . . some things make me afraid, though I don't know why.'

'Well, we mustn't waste any more time in idleness. We must reach one of the ports as soon as we can.'

They reached Eastbourne two days later and Elliott put on his most impressive manner in order to bargain with the master of a merchant vessel whose lip was inclined to curl until Elliott's imperious manner began to show through his disguise, and the clink of guineas sounded in his purse.

The ship's master shrugged a little. He had taken many a strange cargo to Jersey, bound for France, and brought equally queer cargoes back to England. And the tall grim-looking man wanted passage all the way. He could land the gypsy—or pseudo gypsy—somewhere near Boulogne, then it was up to him to brave the coastguards and try to convince them that his party were gypsies. They would need to spin a fine tale to be believed!

Jasmine thought there had never been anything more awful than that sea journey, as the boat heaved and

shuddered. Seasickness seemed to tear her body apart. The men were both good sailors and ignored her agony even if she moaned that she would die of it. Elliott loved the spray on his face, and the fierce surging of the waves seemed to soothe his own troubled spirit.

He knew that much had happened in France since he had managed to help André flee to Scotland. The Bastille had fallen and the King's younger brother, the Comte d'Artois, had urged Louis to take up arms against his people. But Louis had refused and d'Artois had been the first to flee the country and to lead wholesale emigration into Europe and England.

The émigrés were now hated in France, as many of them had planned and plotted with foreign powers to uproot the new government and restore them their own estates. Elliott knew that the Comte de Castillon-Cazals would already be condemned simply because of his wealth and property. He had always been kind and fair to his tenants and the peasants who worked on his land. Perhaps he would be safe in his château in the Dordogne. The house in Paris had no doubt been plundered, and perhaps burned, though the Revolution was against privilege rather than property.

The Comte had been a good, improving landlord, living for the most part on his estate, unlike many nobles who took their rents and spent them on rich living without taking any responsibility for their labourers. Elliott had learned early in life that being the Master of Glenlacie carried responsibility, and the Castillon-Cazals had learned the same lesson.

There was great agricultural wealth in France and the nobles had lived richly, but its potentiality was even greater if modern methods were used. Unfortunately, too, there was a poor system for distributing food to the

poorer people and the resultant starvation had been the main cause of the Revolution. It was the hungry peasants who had led the revolt and Elliott remembered that the cry had been for bread, and more bread.

Elliott had a certain sympathy with the cause of the people and felt that reforms were long overdue, but he had been sickened by the sheer brutality by which the objectives were being reached. Indeed, parts of France shared that revulsion, as in the Vendée and Brittany, but Elliott was no statesman and could see no clear way forward which would bring food to the hungry and compassion for the nobles who had been stripped of everything.

Elliott thought about the gentle Comte and his delicate lady who was Anne-Marie's mother. She would break like a fine china figurine under harsh treatment.

And Anne-Marie herself? He did not know that Jasmine's mental picture of Anne-Marie was of a tall, elegant girl with slender arms, white hands and a disdainful expression on her face, since such a picture was the complete antithesis of her true image. Anne-Marie was a tomboy. She was short and roundly formed as a robin, with bright brown eyes and warm red cheeks, and her hair was like ripe corn. When she went missing at home, she would be found in the dairy helping to churn the butter, and her energy and enthusiasm for life had enchanted the young Elliott when he had stayed at the old château after the death of his father.

Anne-Marie had pulled him out of his grief, since he had loved his father and was deeply stricken by his early death. She had made him laugh, and love. He had loved her then. He loved her still. She was part of his life.

Yet a devilish streak in his nature had been called forth by the small witch—the gypsy girl who was as fierce as a

wild kitten yet as soft and beautiful as a moonbeam. Elliott had heard all her siren calls, and unknown to her, he had eaten some of the grass with its spell which she had laid upon him. Now he must go forward with purpose and pay back the debts which the House of Glenlacie owed to the Castillon-Cazals. They had sheltered his forebears; now he must give shelter to them, and his name and protection to Anne-Marie. And no gypsy dancer must stand in his way.

It had grown dark and was sheeting with rain when the master of the vessel which had brought them to France came to find Elliott, and to deposit the passengers and cargo with scant ceremony at a tiny port on the coast.

'Where are we?' Elliott asked.

'You'll find out soon enough,' the man growled, 'and sooner than you expect, if you are not what you seem. 'Tis no place for a decent law-abiding man to linger these days. There's a fine trade going on amongst the old smugglers, dropping new cargo as close to harbour as they dare, and the coastguards are ever watchful.'

'I have papers,' said Elliott stiffly, though he recognized that the man was offering him a kindness in his own way by warning him of the dangers.

In fact they were stopped by no one and soon they saw the lights of a small village from where it was easy to find a main road, then the shelter of a small wood.

'We will camp here tonight,' said Elliott. 'Lachie, you'll share the room with me. We had best open a bottle of spirits to warm all of us, including you, Jasmine.'

'I don't like spirits,' she protested.

'You won't like anything you'll get if you complain to me,' said Elliott harshly. The task of getting his party and

equipment ashore had been a great strain. 'You'll drink what I give you. Tomorrow is like to be a hard day. We must be ready for it, and we must follow the road for Paris.'

The spirit spread like fire through Jasmine's veins and made her heavy and languid. She forgot about her damp clothing and the sickness which had assailed her, and she slept as deeply as a child.

Next morning the sun shone with new brightness, and Elliott put on his gypsy costume and approached one of the farms to see if he could buy fresh milk and drinking water, either for a coin or a bannock loaf which Jasmine could bake in a heavy black pan over a hot fire.

The woman looked at Elliott suspiciously, but he grinned cheerfully and fluently made a few of the old courtesies. He saw a flicker of laughter in her eyes, which quickly died away. She grabbed the loaf and filled his jug with milk and his bucket with water.

'Be off,' she said. 'It isn't safe, even for gypsies. Take care. No one is abroad who means to mind his own business.'

'I must find my wife's mother in Paris,' he told her. 'Which way does Paris lie?'

'Yonder. Take the road to the right. You will be lucky to find her alive unless she is busy pointing the finger at enemies of the people, like the other old crones. But some people do not like gypsies.'

He nodded and took his leave.

CHAPTER NINE

Elliott was appalled by what he saw as they followed the road which would eventually lead them to Paris. The roads were busy with peasants pushing their worldly goods on handcarts, sometimes with an ox or a bullock, but always with the grey lost look of frightened, forgotten people. They passed untenanted houses and the occasional château where weeds had taken over the gardens, where the fields and woods lay neglected and forlorn.

Here and there a blackened ruin told its own sorry tale and there was a tightness in Elliott's throat as he looked at the land which had once been so fair. What dreadful mistakes had been made, he thought, surveying the grim landscape. The peasants who had worked the land had been deprived of their rights in order to keep the nobles well fed and clothed in the finest that money could buy, but now that their masters had gone, they starved. There was no one to throw them crumbs.

There was a barricade at practically every village, and here and there small bands of soldiers and armed men could be seen keeping to their cover. Elliott remembered that there had been rumours that the Royal cause had been taken up in Brittany and the west of the country.

'We cannot dance for the people,' Jasmine whispered. 'They do not have need of the dance. They need life . . .

food . . . hope. They couldn't take any pleasure in a gypsy dance.'

'The country is not all as you see it,' said Elliott. 'There is great disturbance in Paris, but there are people who are still carrying on with their daily lives.'

'The Republic,' said Jasmine.

'The Republic,' he agreed. 'We must accept France as it is. We are not here to take sides, Jasmine. Remember that.'

'But you must take sides! You are here—'

'Be quiet!' he hissed. 'If you breathe one word of our mission, I will kill you where you stand. You will endanger many lives besides your own.'

She looked at him levelly and knew that he meant it.

'We will not hurry,' he said. 'We are gypsies, with no particular business to keep us tied to a schedule. We are merely interested in what we see.'

'The gypsies will be remaining in Spain or moving to Bohemia,' Jasmine told him. 'They would depend on the wealthy nobles for begging or selling their wares.'

'Don't worry. Someone always makes a profit from war, even civil war,' said Elliott drily. 'There will still be those who live on the fat of the land, even if the countryside looks barren and wasted. You may still have to dance, Jasmine.'

'I don't think I ever want to dance again,' said Jasmine.

That night she heard the cry of the screech owl, and the note was not quite perfect, so that Jasmine grew afraid. She knew it could not be Miall, but there were probably desperate men bent on their own errands, travelling like shadows in the night and signalling in what they deemed to be the safest fashion.

Jasmine started up, then opened the door of her small room and went into the living quarters which Elliott used.

Lachie preferred to sleep under the stairs whenever possible, and had a tent for cooler evenings. Only in a storm did he share the caravan.

Now Jasmine shook Elliott awake.

'There are men signalling, pretending to be screech owls,' she said. 'I . . . I'm afraid. They may ride this way and we're only sheltered by a few trees.'

'They don't make war on us,' said Elliott shortly, angered by being dragged from his sleep. 'Go to your bed, Jasmine.'

She hesitated, still listening, and he reached out and pulled her down beside him. For a while she was stiff in his arms as her ears strained to hear the night sounds, then she sighed as he kissed her softly, then more insistently.

Then with a sigh he loved her again so that she forgot what was beyond the caravan and only remembered that they could be exquisitely happy in each other's arms.

'I love you so,' she whispered. 'There is no one whom I love more than you. I would give my life for you—and I wager that Anne-Marie would not! She cannot love you more than I do.'

'Hush,' he said roughly. 'You do not know what you are saying. You know nothing of Anne-Marie, Mademoiselle de Castillon-Cazals. I cannot talk to you about her. She is part of my life which has nothing to do with you.'

'She lives in the sunshine and I in the shadows. I hate her,' she said, almost viciously.

'Don't you dare to tell me such a thing,' he hissed in her ear. 'You do not know her, therefore you do not hate her. Now go to your own bed and stop playing the temptress. I cannot take a woman until I know that Anne-Marie and her parents are in good circumstances. The Comte and Comtesse may wish to go to Spain, but Anne-Marie returns to Glenlacie with us.'

‘As your wife.’

‘As my wife, certainly. We will be married from the château.’

She gave a sob as the harsh tears caught at her throat. She wanted him and she did not want any other woman to have him, ever.

‘I hope that she is barren,’ she said in a queer, hard, sing-song voice. ‘She will never bear your children.’

She had risen to her feet, and now he bounded from his bed in one lithe movement, and slapped her hard across the cheek. Her head fell back and he slapped her again.

‘Don’t you dare curse Anne-Marie with your foul gypsy tongue,’ he said, hardly above a whisper. Taking her by the shoulders, he propelled her to her own small room and threw her down on the bed.

‘Keep away from me,’ he told her, ‘or I shall I do you a mischief. And you can pray to God that nothing happens to Anne-Marie!’

Jasmine saw her first guillotine in Paris and almost fainted with the shock of it. It towered, red-stained and menacing, against the skyline. She trembled with fright and had to pause and try to regain her courage.

She was clothed in her gypsy costume, as was Elliott, although the long journey had dimmed their splendour. With their skins burned brown by exposure to all weathers, they looked like any colourful gypsies travelling through the Continental countries.

They had spent a long day and night on the outskirts of Paris where they had found a comparatively safe haven for the caravan and horses, and Lachie had been detailed to remain there to safeguard their possessions.

‘I don’t like this place,’ said Jasmine.

There was an air of desolation all round her, even though the roads were busy with traffic of all kinds going to and from the city. Poor people trudged there with hope in their hearts that there would be food to fill their bellies, and others with the same object in view were leaving the city intent on living off the countryside. Important officials checked papers, and families which had been broken up during riots and terror constantly sought for loved ones from whom they were parted.

'We will walk into Paris,' Elliott decided, 'and you will pretend to be my wife. You must be gay and brash, whatever the circumstances. You must enjoy entertaining people and forget the troubles. You understand?'

She nodded, though the very thought of walking through a city where streets had run red with blood chilled her to the heart. She looked at Elliott with a pale ashen face, and his eyes narrowed.

'Or should I leave you here with Lachie?' he asked, his lip curling. 'I thought you brave and full of courage, but perhaps I have mistaken that courage for bad temper.'

'I am not bad tempered,' she cried, the ready colour in her cheeks. 'I'll walk with you, and I'll dance for you. I can be gay if I want.'

The thought of being left behind whilst Elliott walked into danger stiffened her back; she knew that she wanted to be by his side, whatever happened.

The gold that Thomas Muir had collected had been made into ingots, which Elliott had strapped in a specially designed leather belt on his person. The belt also contained their private papers.

'We must deliver the gold to Citizen Armand de Faverges in Rue Saint Joseph,' he told her. 'Remember the address in case we get separated and try to make your way there.'

He made her repeat the address several times and indicated the area where it was located.

'How do you know where to find Rue Saint Joseph?' she asked.

'I know Paris as well as I know London,' Elliott assured her. 'First we will find the district, then we can find the street. I often stayed with the Comte and Comtesse de Castillon-Cazals when I was a boy.'

'Then you knew Anne-Marie when she was a child?'

'Yes,' he said tersely. 'Now, enough chatter. We will pack a small amount of food, but it would be better if we carry nothing, except perhaps a cloak for you in case it grows cold. We've done very well up until now. We've satisfied the officials at every barricade, at practically every village, and we are accepted for what we pretend to be. We've taken nothing from the people and do not have to prove ourselves good citizens since there is no city we can call our own. But it has meant slow progress, and now we must hurry if we mean to cross the Loire and reach the Castillon-Cazals before we are in the grip of colder weather.'

Jasmine was not in any hurry to end their journey, but she had no wish to linger in Paris. She strolled along beside Elliott, gypsy-fashion, and found that the glances cast in their direction were lacking in suspicion. Only when she saw Madame Guillotine, tall and menacing against the skyline, with the crowds gathered to welcome the tumbrils full of wretches who had been spilled out of the Conciergerie, did she falter and cling to Elliott's arm whilst he called out a greeting to the red-capped patriots who wore the tricolour cockade. He called out in French to those who greeted them with ribald remarks, and Jasmine on occasions found herself making similar comments.

'Your French is fair,' said Elliott. 'I did not know you had learned the language so well. Ah—but I forgot . . . you were a companion to André before we left Glenlacie.'

Jasmine shrugged. 'I do not find it difficult to understand the language.'

It was not easy to walk through the streets crowded with such a motley throng of people, and the narrow alleyways were even worse. Refuse lay stinking at every corner. When every man was equal, no man wished to be a scavenger.

'You found the gypsies offensive,' said Jasmine, half sick with the heavy malodour, 'but what do you think of this?'

'Be quiet. We're near the river.'

A heavy mist lay over the Seine, and spilled over into the streets so that Elliott grabbed her arm and began to hurry her onwards. In such a mist there was no need to pretend to casual interest, and now they were bent on their business of delivering the gold to Monsieur de Faverges, who must now be called 'Citizen'.

The gentleman in question was a craftsman who made stained-glass windows, and the door of his shop was kept open to all comers whilst he worked on the glass. Windows had been smashed which must be replaced, but now he would be paid for his work instead of having to wait the pleasure of some noble marquis who was never at home long enough to attend to his bills. This much Citizen de Faverges explained to Elliott after they arrived at his premises, and Elliott had presented him with identity papers.

'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,' said Citizen de Faverges. 'May these words inspire your own country to great deeds, Citizen Maxwell-Ferguson. You have the gold from Citizen Muir?'

'I have,' said Elliott, 'but I must have the safe-conduct papers in return so that I can take my future wife back to Scotland. There are no accusers with fingers pointing towards Mademoiselle de Castillon-Cazals. She and her parents have always dealt fairly with the people.'

'They are aristocrats and hated by the people,' said Citizen de Faverges stonily.

'They are small exchange for the gold I carry,' said Elliott. 'I risked my life to bring it to you, Citizen, to further your cause. Surely I only ask for a just reward.'

'I shall have to seek consent from the authorities . . .'

'I can wait. Citizen Muir will expect to see me returning to Scotland with my chosen wife.'

The inference was not lost. 'It will take time,' the man said at length. 'You may have rest and refreshment in my other chamber.'

'You live alone?'

'Yes,' said Citizen de Faverges, but Elliott could see signs that the room they were shown into was used by a great many people, and he guessed that many plots had been hatched behind Citizen de Faverges's workshop. Briefly he wondered if Thomas Muir had any idea as to what happened to his gold after it was delivered. The poet Robert Burns had shipped guns to France to aid the people, yet he was a man of great compassion for all men. Would not he, too, be sickened by the brutality which had been unleashed?

Jasmine waved away the food which Citizen de Faverges would have spared and placed their own fare upon the table.

'You must share with us, M— . . . Citizen,' she said, and his eyes brightened. Food was scarce, even for one in a position of privilege.

'I have wine,' he said simply. 'We will eat together and share my wine.'

There was a sudden rumbling sound and Jasmine looked round uneasily.

'It is the tumbril,' said Citizen de Faverges placidly. 'Every day we weed out the enemies of the people.'

Jasmine's face had paled again, but Elliott was already making his reply.

'My gypsy woman has been dancing to entertain the people,' he said easily, 'but I see they prefer their own amusements.'

'It is so,' said de Faverges, laughing. 'Each day they are entertained. There is a tribunal of five judges, a public prosecutor and a jury who sit every day in judgment on the accused. Thus we rid society of the oppressors of our people. But now I go for your reward, Citizen. You are not our enemy and your service to our cause will be recognized. Wait here for me. I can arrange for you to be given the papers you require without too much delay, since I have influence. No longer am I merely the maker of windows—I am Citizen de Faverges who has proved himself a patriot.'

'I was assured that you were a man of great importance, Citizen,' said Elliott, bowing. 'I will wait for you.' He handed de Faverges a list of names. 'A safe conduct for these people, if you please.'

Elliott lifted Jasmine's glass of wine and placed it into her hand after the Citizen had hurried along the back alley from the workshop. She shook her head, then drank it without relish when he insisted.

'I don't like this place,' she whispered.

'You've whined about France ever since we set foot on French soil,' said Elliott, 'yet it is one of the fairest lands on God's earth. Truly, it has become soiled and beaten,

but the land is rich and fertile. Some day it will be fruitful again.'

'But now it's full of hate. Can't you feel the hate all around you?'

He looked into her small white face, then pulled her close. 'And you only want love, little Jasmine. When we return home again I will see what can be done to give you a happy life—one in which you are loved for yourself.'

She did not reply. She only wanted Elliott's love.

He kissed her gently, then as her lips unfolded like a soft-petalled flower under his own, once again he was kissing her passionately.

'You stir me,' he told her thickly, 'and where there is danger, a man is stirred the more. You shouldn't tempt me.'

'You won't forget me after you let me go?'

He smoothed back her hair under her head-dress. 'I will never forget you.'

She sighed and rested in his arms, then stiffened suddenly as they heard the faint noise of cheering.

'What's that?'

'The people have found a hero.'

She relaxed again, then grew uneasy when she thought about the true explanation for the cheers she had heard.

Citizen de Faverges returned after a long wait, but without the papers which Elliott had asked for.

'You must wait,' he said. 'Rest easy, they will come. A messenger will bring them soon. Whilst you wait, you will be my guest.'

'You are most kind,' said Elliott easily, but he fervently hoped that the papers would not be delayed for days; he had heard that such a thing could easily happen.

The apartment was airless and Jasmine hated to feel imprisoned. Almost she felt that she had been tried and

condemned before the five judges and the jury, sentenced to live out her life in this small dark room, above a street of broken stones where the rats forged amidst the refuse—and, not a stone's throw away, the blood-thirsty mob condemned men, women and children to death, the innocent dying along with the guilty, the ignorant growing arrogant and bumptious with power.

When Citizen de Faverges came to them the following day, they could sense his lack of ease.

'You must leave now,' he told Elliott. 'The papers are late in arriving, but tonight I have friends who will gather round my table. They must not find you here.'

'But the papers—?' asked Elliott.

'You may return when my friends have gone. I shall place a cockade in the window when it is safe.'

'Where shall we go whilst we wait?'

Citizen de Faverges shrugged. 'There are many patriots in the streets. You will be safer mingling with the rabble than you would be here. My friends do not like to be overheard when they discuss important matters.'

Jasmine's mouth had gone dry with fear but she dug her nails into her palms, too proud to show that fear to Elliott. The apartment was like a prison, but it was a haven in this fearful nightmarish city into which they had plunged.

Citizen de Faverges looked out carefully then beckoned to them, telling them to hurry, swiftly closing the door behind them as soon as they stood in the street.

Crowds were already beginning to gather, a rabble of human beings more terrible to Jasmine than any she had ever encountered. There were men armed with every conceivable weapon, their common denominator being a pompous and belligerent swagger, but even more terrible

were the women, who were also armed and whose eyes gleamed with blood lust.

From the more substantial houses, men, women and children clothed in finer garments were being dragged into the street, their hands bound by ropes, whilst shrieking harpies called out their accusations, accusing them of filling their greedy bellies with food whilst their own children starved. They had thrown their crusts to the dogs, which were better fed than the poor.

Jasmine clung to Elliott's hand and her nails almost drew blood as they dug into his flesh. She watched grey-faced gentlemen with shaven heads being hurled away for trial, and saw their women and children bludgeoned to silence when they howled with protest.

'Look as though you're enjoying it,' Elliott commanded. 'Saunter and sway your hips. You're here to entertain.'

'I grow faint,' she whispered.

'If you faint, I swear I'll be forced to beat you. Look up at the sky. It's still as clean and blue as when God fashioned it. They cannot change the heavens. We must go with the crowd until nightfall. Our lives depend on it.'

'I . . . I will try,' she croaked.

She gasped as the crowd suddenly parted and a young girl was flung onto the cobbled street. Jasmine had seen the girl throw off the claw-like hold of one of the harpies and how, when one of the men had tried to molest her, she had bitten him until his blood ran into her mouth and she spat it out at his feet.

The anger of the rabble turned upon the girl. She was thrown to the ground and her gown ripped to expose her white body, which grew filthy as she rolled in the dust in a vain attempt to gain freedom. The great lout whose blood

she had drawn prepared himself for rape and Jasmine looked on in horrified fascination as the girl's body was torn by his vicious assault, while the crowd cheered him to greater and greater efforts.

Jasmine felt a sickness welling in her and her senses swirled. She would have fallen had not Elliott made her walk away, through another section of the crowd shouting the name of some poor creature who had so many accusers that he must surely be guilty of every possible crime.

The longest hours of Jasmine's life slowly passed. She had never known greater terror, and that terror was as much for Elliott as for herself. Once or twice he was accosted by brutish men and slaving women, since he was unable to disguise the arrogant set of his head which marked him as one of the hated aristocrats. But he had learned his lesson well, in the days when he and André had roamed the mean narrow streets in search of adventure, and he was able to cap a ribald remark with one even more to the taste of the crowd.

But Jasmine could sense his revulsion by the way he grasped her hand and the curling of his lip. He forced her to swagger and pirouette, promising the crowds entertainment whilst they waited for the guillotine to descend.

Jasmine's face was as pale as death when eventually they returned to Citizen de Faverges's shop and saw that a cockade had been placed in the window.

Silently they slipped inside and Jasmine fell to her knees, crying silently.

'Get up,' hissed Elliott. 'On your feet, damn it!'

She rose unsteadily as Citizen de Faverges came to greet them.

'She has danced too well and has drunk cheap wine.' Elliott laughed easily. 'She must go to bed.'

Citizen de Faverges shrugged. It was his considered opinion that all women were fools.

After many hours of waiting when it seemed as though the papers would never come, there came an urgent rapping sound at the door and Citizen de Faverges opened it narrowly, then wider, to admit a courier wearing the familiar red hat and tricolour cockade.

The man's face was mean with suspicion as his small blackcurrant eyes swept over Elliott and Jasmine, then Citizen de Faverges thanked him again, formally and firmly, and he walked away, his wooden shoes clattering on the stones.

Elliott had refused to produce the gold until the papers were ready, but now he undressed and unstrapped the moneybelt, releasing each ingot from its leather pocket. The gold was heavy and de Faverges seized upon it avidly.

'This will be used to further our cause,' he said, his eyes gleaming frantically. 'We have already received support from many who are sympathetic to the Revolution.'

'I would like a receipt for Citizen Muir,' said Elliott, and de Faverges counted the ingots and made out the receipt.

'Now go quickly,' he said. 'You have your permits but there are those who use our laws to dispose of their own enemies.'

'I have no enemies in France,' said Elliott.

'Some gypsy may have put the evil eye on a man and his family,' warned de Faverges. 'Not everyone admires the gypsy.'

'We will lose no time,' said Elliott, and took Jasmine's hand in his own.

They had spent several nights and days in Citizen de Faverges's workshop, and now it was almost night again. Elliott hurried through the streets as swiftly and silently as

a night creature whilst Jasmine panted for breath by his side.

She was sure that they were being followed and soon Elliott, too, was convinced of it.

'Give me your head-dress,' he hissed. 'Its brilliance is reflecting any light which falls on us.'

She tore it off and he lost time as he strapped it under his moneybelt. Behind them they could hear the sounds of men's voices and running feet, but Elliott knew the city well from the days when he and André had been in and out of its burrows, seeking new adventures. Soon they were in more familiar quarters and near to André's Paris home, but the streets were almost unrecognizable with the destruction which had been wrought upon them.

'This way,' panted Elliott, pulling Jasmine's hand and diving down a narrow street which led to the courtyards of each of the imposing residences. 'If we are stopped, then we're looking at the houses to see if anything has been left to steal. We make jokes about how thoroughly the houses have been searched. All right?'

'All right,' she gasped, her lungs bursting for air. It seemed to her that they had been running for hours.

Suddenly her heart almost stopped beating as they were stopped by officers and asked to identify themselves.

'Ah, good sirs . . .' sighed Elliott. 'This one . . . she is my wife, but she would be with the soldiers or with anyone who would pleasure her. You see before you a harlot who deserves to be beaten and I take her home to teach her a lesson. She would pleasure you, too, but I do not advise it, sirs, after where she has been . . .'

The officers made noises of sympathy and amusement whilst Jasmine stood, gasping for breath and sobbing wildly.

'Do not be too hard on her, gypsy,' said one. 'She is as God made her.'

Then the men waved them on their way.

Jasmine's feet dragged as they neared the spot where Lachie waited with the caravan, then she heard Elliott's indrawn breath as they neared the woodland where they had made everything as safe and secure as they could.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Lachie—he's gone! The caravan and everything has gone!'

Slowly Jasmine sank to her knees and began to sob quietly. She had been through too much in a very short time.

'Be quiet,' snapped Elliott. 'Haven't we enough to worry about without tears?'

The harsh note in his voice had its effect, and she looked up at him with hatred. He had no softness in him, she decided; he only pretended softness when it suited him. She felt as though she could die of fatigue and the terror which had assailed her still seemed to cling round her like a grey shroud.

'We can do nothing more until dawn,' said Elliott, 'And I am ready to sleep on a bed of nails and find it comfortable. Come, Jasmine, and we'll find a bed of soft mosses instead, with the trees and starry sky to decorate our bedroom. We can press warmth into each other's bodies.'

'I will not be used,' she said, the hurtful tears in her eyes. 'Sometimes you need me, but when you don't, I'm thrown aside like a piece of discarded clothing until you want me again.'

'There's no time for complaints,' he said. 'Tomorrow we may have to walk for miles. Perhaps I can buy a horse, but perhaps I cannot. It is as I feared. The animals are as ill-fed and in the same poor state as the people. Where

could we get other horses like the fine strong creatures who have pulled our caravan and who were left in Lachie's charge? I do not care to think that we have lost him, and our caravan.'

'But it does not matter about Lachie?'

His tone became harsh and she knew that Lachie mattered more than anything. 'No more grumbles. Here, let's spread out your cloak. It'll make us a fine bed.'

She lay down and a moment later he was beside her, holding her in his arms; she had no strength left in her to protest, or to resist him when he removed her embroidered dress, then took her in love and passion. Her own was as great as his.

'Have I made you happy, Jasmine?' he whispered, and her cheeks grew warm with colour, though she answered him frankly.

'Once you only gave me pain because you had no thought for me, but now you are more gentle until you begin to grow strong in your love. That gives me pleasure.'

The moon came from behind the clouds and bathed them in shafts of light which filtered through the trees and she could see the fine contours of his face, and touch the fine lines of his mouth. His eyes glowed as brightly as her own.

'You have now punished your errant wife,' she said with a laugh.

'I beg pardon?'

'I'm thinking of the guards whom we met, and the tale you told of how you'd punish me for betraying you with other men.'

His face darkened. 'I *would* punish you if you betrayed me with other men,' he promised her.

'But . . .'

She was about to protest that she was her own mistress in such affairs since he did not own her. But he *did* own her she remembered. He owned her body and her heart. In any case, she knew it was useless to argue with him. Langurous and drowsy after his love-making, she felt relaxed and safe in his arms.

Suddenly Jasmine was wrenched awake as Elliott leapt to his feet. The morning had dawned and the new day was bright with promise. Soon it would be into winter but summer still clung tightly to a few last lingering days before winter greedily wrenched them away.

She was startled into wakefulness as she heard the slow familiar plod of their horses which travelled with them so faithfully. Elliott had had to pay extra for the beasts to travel with them, but he had thought it worth the gold. Now the caravan was arriving with Lachie walking beside it.

'God in Heaven, man—where have you been?' cried Elliott. 'Why did you not stay where we had camped? I could have walked miles looking for you.'

'I crave your pardon, Master Elliott,' said Lachie, his head hanging in shame. 'I should have waited, but ye were a long time and I thocht not to see ye till morning. It was the woman, ye see.'

'What woman?' asked Elliott.

'At the wee cottage. That peasant's cottage ye can see through the trees. I asked her for clean water for drinking, and she was trying to move some soil, so I brought the caravan round the back of the cottage and helped her. She's a lass by hersel', ye see, a poor bit lass now, though she has been a fine woman in her time. Ye can tell.'

'So you helped this fine woman,' said Elliott sarcastically, 'so well that you did not come back to our camp at nightfall. You stayed to help her.'

‘Well . . . It was the wine, ye see. I gave her a bite o’ food and she had wine and with one thing and another . . . well, it made me sleepy, ye see. It was very potent.’

‘I ought to take a stick to your miserable back,’ cried Elliott, but Jasmine thought she detected suppressed laughter in his voice and his eyes were bright. If he were not the Master of Glenlacie, he would put his arms round Lachie and hold him close, she thought. A moment later she had run towards the older man.

‘Oh Lachie, I’m so glad to see you,’ she said. ‘Lachie, we must get away from here. I don’t like Paris, and we have such a long way to go. It will take days and days.’

‘Aye,’ said Lachie unhappily. ‘I’ve seen a few bands o’ men lurking about, and it’s rumoured that some are for the Royal cause among the ordinary people, the ones who were well enough suited with their masters. Not everyone likes to be independent. Not everyone can find their own meat so easily.’

‘What’s on your mind, Lachie?’

‘Well, Master Elliott, if we’ve been helping the patriots, the Royalists will not be thanking ye, and Odile—that nice wee woman—says there are spies everywhere and not only spies for the Republic. Ye could . . . we all could be in danger from both sides, and some might not believe we are the gypsies.’

He looked at Elliott and Jasmine unhappily as he continued. ‘There have been a few encampments around with gypsies travelling down country to reach Spain, and we are maybe not so rough and unkempt as we should be. Ye’re too fond o’ the water and ye’ve made Miss Jasmine the same.’

‘That’s just an excuse for you not to wash yourself,’ growled Elliott. ‘You stink of cheap wine and your eyes

are bleary. I'll not be surprised if the hammers are at your head.'

Elliott looked in a cheerful mood and Jasmine thought he was probably relieved that the most hazardous part of his journey had been accomplished. He was rid of Thomas Muir's gold, and he had the papers he sought.

And now he would travel without delay and would not rest until Anne-Marie was in his arms.

The sour sickness of jealousy was in her mouth. She could not bear him to hold Anne-Marie as he had held her. But Anne-Marie would want silks and satins and fine down feathers for her bed. She would not know the sweetness of soft green moss and the fresh beauty of a sky, blue as midnight, with diamonds sparkling and the moon to light up Elliott's eyes. That much Anne-Marie would never take from her.

'We will eat breakfast, then we will be on our way,' said Elliott. 'How do our provisions fare, Lachie, or have you given them all to Odile?'

'Well enough,' Lachie grinned. 'There was only one bottle o' wine, not half a dozen and my head doesn't reel that much on only one bottle.'

CHAPTER TEN

Once again the pattern of their journey continued as before, as they moved south-west and again began to live the life of gypsies.

The days began to grow shorter, as warm September gave way to cooler October, and they had to spend longer hours round the camp-fire when the cooler winds of autumn came upon them.

They had travelled to Le Mans, then directly south to La Flèche and onwards towards Saumur where great houses and châteaux, silent and empty, reared upwards from the rocks like vast sentinels.

It was the second week in October when they rested outside Saumur and they had many miles still to travel. Gypsies often travelled at night, but Elliott was unable to adopt this custom since he could not risk losing his way in the darkness. The countryside seemed to crawl with life as soon as darkness descended, and he had no wish to be caught up in affairs which were none of his concern.

In order to make use of their time as they moved slowly southwards, covering as many miles each day as they could manage without undue strain, he began to educate Jasmine, surprised at how quickly she could learn. Lady Anne had already taught her to read and write, and now he gave her lectures on history and geography, though she

was remarkably knowledgeable about other countries, having learned from the much-travelled gypsies. He taught her mathematics and astronomy, but her knowledge of natural history and astrology was greater than his.

As Jasmine's knowledge became wider, so did her nature become more controlled and her speech more correct. She learned how to eat with refinement, though this was only accomplished through sulks and tears. Elliott hurt her feelings when he lost patience and likened her to a pig eating from its trough.

'*You are a pig!*' she cried. 'You don't care how you speak to me. You don't allow for the times I forget a little.'

'You shouldn't forget what I tell you,' he said flatly. 'I am obliged to live with you. I will not live with an uncouth slut who keeps making the same mistake over and over again.'

'Yet you bought a gypsy because you *wanted* a gypsy, and you wanted me to make a gypsy of you. At every barricade we are stopped and I have to help them to believe that we are all gypsies. How can I live in one world, then suddenly change to another? You ask too much of me.'

'I ask of you what I fully expect you to be able to do. You're not a fool, you're just careless. You must always have your wits about you. You cannot afford to make mistakes of any kind. If you can learn what I teach you, then your wits will be sharpened and it may save your life some time. The Revolution isn't confined just to Paris, you know.'

'I know,' she said drily. 'I have eyes in my head.'

The desolation of late autumn now added to the bleak landscape of destruction and neglect, and the few

peasants stared at them stolidly from the fields where they were trying to restore the soil and wrest richness from its fertility. Often fields were scorched where they had been razed by fire and burned-out mansions testified to their owners' harsh and contemptuous treatment of the serfs in earlier times.

As they moved through Charente, Jasmine began to look more intently at the countryside.

'It begins to look . . . different, somehow,' she said to Elliott.

'How different?'

'I . . . I don't know. Just different.'

'You are becoming more used to France, that's all. Today I want to take an inventory of the food we have left. I know I packed enough to last us for many months in the way of flour and oatmeal and other such basic provisions, but our progress is slower than I estimated, and we have to journey north again after Castillon-Cazals. It lies in the Dordogne area beyond Angoulême and the finest wines are made from the grapes grown on the estate. The peasants who work there in the fields are happy enough and are well enough fed and rewarded by Monsieur le Comte. But we cannot ask them to help us with our store of food for the return journey. There are obvious problems preventing the free distribution of supplies throughout France, and they could be in difficulties even if things are well with them by comparison.'

'No, we cannot take their food,' agreed Jasmine.

'And do try to clean up the caravan,' Elliott went on. 'I want it to look well when—'

'When you show it to Anne-Marie,' said Jasmine tartly. How she hated Anne-Marie!

'I will have no more tantrums,' said Elliott placidly.

Now that he was nearing the end of his goal, he

alternated between nervous irritation and the excitement of anticipation. Jasmine grew more sullen as she caught the eager light in his eyes and knew that it was for another girl, and her own temper was not of its best. On some occasions when Elliott would have come to her room, she managed to bar the door against him so that he flew into one of his black moods and forced her when he did get hold of her. Her bruises showed all too plainly the struggle between them, and Elliott would lapse into a morose mood as she flaunted the discoloured marks in front of him.

She was growing daily more mature and her beauty was flowering before his eyes. Her dearest possession was an ivory comb which he had bought her and which she always kept in a safe pocket in her gown. She spent many hours brushing and combing her hair so that it now shone in great rippling waves and curls down her back. She knew which herbs were beneficial to her skin, both for external application and as a soothing and blood-purifying drink, and she secretly used them knowing that despite the now rationed food her glowing complexion would not suffer. Her reward was a gradual awareness on Elliott's part that his gypsy girl had grown into a great beauty, and often she would catch his eyes resting upon her with a curious light in them.

Jasmine smiled secretly to herself. Whatever he thought in his heart, he was not indifferent to her. On the occasions after she had locked him out and he had forced her, she bore her bruises proudly and with inner delight, knowing that he had wanted her desperately enough to take her by force.

She was torn between passionate love for him and angry hatred that he would still turn from her and want another girl. She had forgotten that other world where he

had to live as a gentleman, on his considerable estate, and provide it with a mistress acceptable to his world. Marriage with a gypsy girl would be out of the question.

The weather had worsened, and one day the wind grew so wild and furious that they had to look for shelter long before nightfall.

'We'll make for those woods,' Elliott decided, pointing to a small group of trees.

'No, let's try to keep going,' cried Jasmine. 'Round yonder bend in the road we will come to a better area of woodland more easily reached.'

They struggled forward according to Jasmine's directions and found the sheltered spot that she had predicted. It was only after they had settled that Elliott turned to her curiously.

'I thought you had never travelled in France.'

She shook her head slowly. 'Judd and Rima would not come to France.'

'Then how did you know about this shelter?'

She avoided his eyes. 'I cannot *pen baji*—but sometimes I think I have dreamed about this countryside. That's why I find it so . . . so different from the rest. I know it all. I know that road and where to find a small village . . . and a white house with shutters painted green.'

She had closed her eyes and seemed to be telling the story as though it were a fairy tale.

Elliott began to laugh softly. 'Oh Jasmine, you are a true Romany, full of romance and mystery. I have been watching it flower this many a day, ever since I began to teach you some lessons—'

She leapt to her feet, her face scarlet with anger.

'So you laugh at me!' she panted. 'How dare you make fun of me when I tell you the truth! I *do* know these things.'

I've seen it all in my dreams and I know this place. I knew it was nearby, did I not?'

'Easily guessed,' said Elliott, his eyes still glinting, though they were also full of pleasure at the sight of her in her anger. She wore a plain simple gown which Lady Anne had ordered for her against the advance of colder weather, and its soft green folds enhanced the beauty of her long slender body and breasts now well formed.

When he had taken her, he had done so with a care to keeping her free of bearing his child, knowing that such a child would hurt Anne-Marie and cause his own heart to be torn, but sometimes he knew that a child of Jasmine's would be a beautiful child, and his heart would hunger with strange yearnings which defied common sense.

Now he was delighted with the mind which was flowering under his tutelage, and the knowledge which he, in turn, had found in her. He had thought the gypsy uneducated but instead he had found a new world of education which was as old as time—a world of knowledge and folklore which fascinated and sometimes repelled him as she told him of what she had learned from Rima and Judd.

Jasmine described the strange ingredients which some gypsies used to make salves to cure all disorders, such as the fat of dogs, bears, wolves and frogs. In order to cure a fever, a hole was bored in a tree, into which the patient must spit three times whilst chanting a spell—*Shilályi, shilályi, preja káthe tu besha, káthe tu beshá!* Afterwards the hole must be sealed and the fever thereafter transferred to the tree.

'Did you *use* such cures?' asked Elliott, deeply fascinated.

'Rima preferred to use herbs,' Jasmine said, 'but other gypsies use such cures. A black hen, split open and laid on

a boil will cure it, though water must be drunk from three springs and wood must be thrown nine times into the fire each day until the boil is well.'

'Yet you were squeamish at the sight of blood in Paris,' he marvelled, and she went pale.

'That was different.'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'That was different. What else do you know?' His voice turned teasing. 'How to make love charms, I'll be bound.'

But she had the gypsy secretiveness which kept some of that knowledge to herself, hugged in her own heart. That belonged to her, as a woman, and had been whispered by Rima when she became old enough to understand. Thanks to Rima her body moved with easy rhythm and never gave her pain.

It was early November when they passed through Poitiers en route for Angoulême. Elliott was now impatient to reach the château at Castillon-Cazals, and they travelled further than usual each day in spite of the darkness, since the contours of the countryside were becoming familiar to him. But although they had grown used to desolation and despair, here it was particularly poignant for him. Here it touched his heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gradually the contours of the countryside had changed as they entered a more mountainous area, rich in woodland and sparkling rivers, where the fields had been planted with vines. These had now been harvested but the countryside was less sad and desolate and the travellers whom they met less silent and ghost-like with fatigue and hunger.

But the energy of the people held a new menace; the caravan attracted more attention, and the travellers felt that many eyes were drawn towards them. Jasmine shivered uneasily, even though she played her part as the careless gypsy owing allegiance to no one except the age-old tradition which kept the dark-skinned people forever on the move.

The countryside delighted her, however, and reminded her a little of some of the counties in England which she loved.

'It is beautiful,' she said to Elliott as they travelled through La Roche Chalais, then south-east towards Montpon-Menéstérol.

Jasmine wanted to rest there for a few days, so reluctant was she to reach their destination, but Elliott seemed to have a fever in his blood which kept him travelling.

'I must clean the verdo before we arrive,' she said.

'You were not always so houseproud,' he reminded

her. 'Monsieur le Comte will have servants to clean it.'

'It was *you* who wanted it clean! And anyway, suppose he has no servants—?'

'He is a good master. The servants know when they are well looked after. We will rest at Castillon-Cazals and be civilized for a few days, then make our plans for the return journey. It will be good to have refreshment of spirit again.'

Good to prepare himself for marriage with Anne-Marie, thought Jasmine. In just another day or two she would have lost him for ever, but he would not be delayed by her talk.

They arrived at the Castillon-Cazals estate near Sainte Foy-la-Grande on a cold dull morning in late November which promised that winter would soon be hard upon them, and Elliott took the caravan to the high wrought-iron gates with the light of anticipation in his eyes.

Since the death of his own parents, the Comte had become a father figure to him, and he looked forward to a warm and loving welcome from the tall, distinguished man whom he had loved ever since he could remember.

But above all there was Anne-Marie, who would look like a robin in winter, with shining red cheeks and bright brown eyes, her heavy fair shining hair constantly being made tidy.

Jasmine had secretly worked hard on her own appearance and now she, the gypsy, looked more ladylike than Anne-Marie had ever done. Her browned skin glowed with cleaning and there was a bloom of health about her which made her look like a fresh peach. Her eyes were as liquid as fresh cool green water and her hair was a feast of soft dark red beauty. She had put aside her gypsy costume in its box, having cleaned and mended it carefully, and she wore a fresh russet-coloured gown

which made her hair look like beech leaves in autumn.

Elliott gave no sign that he had noticed the care she had taken with her appearance, though inwardly it disturbed him. How could he make Anne-Marie understand that he had been travelling with a bought gypsy girl when that girl looked like a well-born lady! Yet Anne-Marie would understand. Anne-Marie had always forgiven him everything, and he could not wait to see her again.

He bade Lachie and Jasmine wait at the entrance gates and called loudly for old Jaime, who lived in the lodge, to come and open them, but it seemed that the lodge was empty, or that Jaime was employed elsewhere.

The gates were unlocked and Elliott opened them and strode up the drive, which showed signs of neglect, then disappeared from view. After a long wait, Jasmine's chin firmed.

'I think we ought to go after him, Lachie,' she said.

'Ach no, Miss Jasmine,' Lachie protested. 'The master said to wait here, and he meant it.'

'And I say we go and see that he is in good heart, and I mean it,' she said tartly.

Lachie sighed. He had long since forgotten to regard Miss Jasmine as the gypsy girl, and tended to think of her as the mistress. The warm regard that he had always felt for her had deepened into respect and love. Now she could twist him round her little finger.

She opened the gates wide and, half fearfully, Lachie guided the caravan up the drive and round to the front of a lovely, imposing old château which was showing signs of neglect in the unkempt drive and neglected parkland.

Elliott was at the front of the house, talking to an elderly woman clad from head to foot in heavy rough black garments, and he was too preoccupied to show anger when Jasmine came to stand beside him.

'The Comtesse is dead,' he said briefly. 'She died of a chest ailment, and the Comte and Anne-Marie left for Bordeaux in a carriage only three days ago. I think they hoped to find a ship sailing to England. There has been trouble even here. Madame Gautier is wife to the steward, Jean Gautier, and they are looking after Castillon-Cazals for the time being. I have known Madame Gautier in happier times.'

He repeated the last sentence in French and turned to the frozen-faced woman in black who stared back at him stolidly. Then suddenly her eyes filled with tears and she looked round furtively.

'Go quickly, Monsieur Elliott,' she whispered. 'It is not wise to stay here. The soldiers will be taking up residence and Jean would not stay to talk with you in case they ride up quickly. There is great unrest because they fear that there are many new émigré armies from other countries coming to support the Royalist cause once more, and those émigrés who bring foreign soldiers to French soil to fight French patriots are greatly hated. It is the aristocrats who behave so. The good Comte and Mademoiselle Anne-Marie tried to leave and to reach safety, but in the Gironde district there is much trouble. The Girondins have tried to run the country and they have their supporters here, and we have learned . . . ' She began to sob. 'We have learned . . . '

Elliott put his arm round the old woman's shoulders and led her into the cool shadowy interior of the old château. Jasmine followed, looking round curiously at the fine pictures and delicately elegant furnishings. It reminded her very much of André and in her mind's eye she could see him walking through these beautiful rooms with Anne-Marie by his side.

There was a faint elusive perfume which grew stronger

as Elliott led the way into a huge drawing room full of chairs and settees which looked much too frail for comfort. There were smaller cabinets and tables with elaborately carved legs picked out in gold leaf. A great deal of it appealed to the gypsy in Jasmine, and she looked around with wonder and delight.

‘Now, Madame,’ said Elliott firmly, as the old woman’s sobs subsided. ‘I must try to find the Comte and Anne-Marie. You understand?’

Her red-rimmed eyes were dilated with fear and she looked up at him wildly.

‘You will be killed, Monsieur Elliott, or . . . or taken prisoner—even tortured, if the soldiers are not satisfied with your answers. And the young miss—they will make a plaything of her. Please go, before Jean returns.’

‘I’m sure Monsieur le Comte would wish to offer me the hospitality of his home, if he were here,’ said Elliott easily, ‘and Mademoiselle Anne-Marie . . .’

How beautiful she must be, thought Jasmine. Her jealousy was slowly turning to admiration. This room was a setting for a princess among women.

‘Can you remember where the Comte and Anne-Marie planned to stay overnight on the journey to Bordeaux?’ Elliott asked. ‘They have friends in Bordeaux, as I remember. To whom would they turn if they needed help, Madame Gautier? I do not wish to choose the wrong friend, you understand.’

The old woman was as rigid as a statue and Elliott grew impatient. If he could find the Comte and Anne-Marie before they attempted to leave France, then he could provide them with their papers.

‘Come now, Madame Gautier, you can surely trust me. You must know that I hope to make Mademoiselle Anne-Marie my bride . . .’

The old woman gave a great hoarse cry and began to sob hysterically.

'Oh, Monsieur Elliott! I dread to tell you, but now I must. We . . . we have learned that Monsieur le Comte and Mademoiselle Anne-Marie are no more. Their coach was overturned and they were thrown from it as they were travelling so fast. You knew Mademoiselle Anne-Marie. She was always headstrong and lacking in patience, and she drove like a fiend when they would have been stopped so that the horses bolted and the coach was smashed into pieces. Jean has seen the wreckage and their broken bodies. Oh, Monsieur Elliott—our good family is no more!'

Elliott's face had gone grey and he turned almost blindly to Jasmine.

'I cannot believe it. I . . . I *cannot*!' He looked again at the weeping elderly woman. 'I must have proof of this.'

'Jean has seen their dead bodies. He would not lie.'

'Oh my God.' Elliott turned again to Jasmine but she too looked colourless and stricken, and there was a dulled look in her eyes as the vision of the wrecked coach seemed to hover in front of her eyes. She swayed where she stood, and Madame Gautier took her arm.

'The little one grows faint. I would offer you wine, Mademoiselle, but Jean—'

'I am quite well, Madame,' said Jasmine politely in French, as she took command of herself. Elliott needed her attentions more than she needed those of Madame Gautier. He was holding himself stiffly, like a block of marble, and Jasmine turned to the older woman, her voice peremptory.

'Wine, if you please, Madame, for Monsieur.'

'No . . . please, there is no need,' said Elliott woodenly. 'I have no wish to stay for refreshment. I . . . I

have everything I need in the caravan.'

The woman looked very distressed and a tear trickled down her cheek, but she was also very uneasy.

'All gone,' she said hoarsely. 'And the Comte was a good man—'

'Not *all* gone,' said Elliott. 'Monsieur André will return when he can.'

'Monsieur André?' The woman's eyes lit up for a moment. 'He will return? But . . . but is he then an émigré?'

'Enforced,' said Elliott. 'He was badly wounded in Paris but I took him to my home in Scotland, Madame. He will wish to return to his home one day, I'm sure. He is gradually regaining his strength.'

'It is in the hands of God,' the woman whispered, again looking over her shoulder.

'Jean Gautier is a fine steward.'

She nodded and regained her composure, facing Elliott with great dignity.

'Go quickly, Monsieur, as I bid you. I am grieved not to welcome you as Monsieur le Comte would have wished, but news travels fast. There are the curious, and the spies, and those who wish to be important. You understand?'

'I understand.'

Elliott would have left then with no further ado, but Jasmine saw the blind stricken look in his eyes and she turned again to the woman.

'Monsieur Elliott has received a shock. He should rest and take some refreshment, Madame, or I fear for his health.'

'His health will be in even more danger if he stays, Mademoiselle. I tell you, the soldiers come and stay here.'

'I am not afraid of the soldiers; perhaps it is yourself

you fear for, if you admit us to the château.' She turned to Elliott. 'You should not leave so quickly. You should rest after receiving such a shock. They cannot turn you out of your friend's home.'

He stared at her blankly. Normally she avoided all contact with the soldiers, but now her only thought was for him since he looked stricken to the heart.

'No, we must go,' said Elliott. 'I do not wish to stay here now.'

'But—'

'Don't argue, Jasmine. We will go. I tell you I don't want to remain here.'

'God go with you,' whispered Madame Gautier. 'I am so glad that you came or we would not know about Monsieur André.'

They guided the caravan away from the Castillon-Cazals estate, following the path along which they had previously travelled. Jasmine was glad to leave the caravan in Lachie's capable hands. Her head seemed to swell and her senses were in a turmoil; she kept seeing the image of an overturned coach with the dead faces of a man and a woman. It had haunted her dreams for years, yet she had no second sight and could not tell fortunes.

But she had cursed in gypsy language. In her selfish rages and in her jealousy she had cursed Anne-Marie, who now lay dead; Jasmine felt that blackness had entered her soul. She had ruined the life of the man she loved most in the world. He sat like a blind man beside her, and somehow she must accept the loneliness of her own guilt, and try to help him to bear his.

She found the bottle of spirits and poured some for Elliott, thought he was abstemious by nature. She thanked God for this because now the spirits would act as

a medicine since his body was not immune to their effects.

'Drink this, Elliott,' she commanded. 'It will make you feel better.'

'Leave me alone,' he said roughly. 'Don't talk to me.'

'Drink it,' she insisted and he took the draught of spirit and quaffed it quickly, thrusting the cup from him.

It had all happened too quickly. For weeks he had planned this journey to Castillon-Cazals, his thoughts centred round Anne-Marie, but also intent on returning the Crystal Heart to the Comte. It had been part of the Castillon-Cazals family history for so many years and Elliott had felt that he could not rest until the Comte held the diamond in his hands once more.

He had imagined the family still living and working in the vineyards at the old château, the wine still being made and stored in the fine cellars. To be denied entrance to the château which was a second home to him and to learn that the family—*his* family—were all dead, but for André, was a shock too great to bear. Yet only three days ago Anne-Marie and her father had been alive and well. If he had arrived only three days before, they could all have travelled north again, retracing their journey and living gypsy-fashion as he had done until they arrived in England. And as an extra safeguard, he had papers which would prove them friends to the people, not traitors ready to take up arms against their own country.

There had been one or two days wasted when Jasmine was ill. If that had not happened they might have been in time. And the gypsy girl had often bewitched him into forgetting Anne-Marie and betraying her with his passion for Jasmine. She was a witch to have enchanted him in this way.

The spirit was harsh and it went to his head as his morose thoughts became more and more confused.

Jasmine saw his sullen looks and thought that Elliott, too, was remembering her curses against Anne-Marie.

'Get away from me, gypsy woman,' he snarled at her when she would have comforted him, and she had no choice but to obey. She felt she had never been more unhappy in her life, or more vulnerable. They were in a foreign country, miles from the familiar haunts of Cumberland and the Scottish hills and mountains she knew so well. Judd had tended to travel over the northern counties and she had seldom been to the south of England. She did not know that he had served his prison sentence in the south, and became claustrophobic whenever he reached hailing distance of the area which was so repugnant to him.

Near Velines they rested for a day or two in the tiny hamlet of Masmontet. Jasmine was again wearing her gypsy costume, and the peasants took them to be ordinary gypsies not worth their interest.

Jasmine had given Elliott more spirits and for a while he was quite drunk, black and snarling in his anger against himself and against the fate which had robbed him of the girl he had always expected to marry. He ill-used Jasmine but for once she did not complain and knew that he spilled his anger with his seed and that sooner or later he would be spent.

Her own nights were sleepless and for that she was thankful as she dreaded the nightmares. She dared not look into her own soul because she did not know whether or not she was truly the witch, as Elliott believed, or whether it was all some horrible coincidence. And every time sleep did claim her, the nightmare which had bedevilled her for years came upon her and she cried out in terror. Once again she seemed to be in the coach, touching the faces of the dead people and screaming, and

fear grew in her as it had done near Canterbury in England.

As they rested for a few days at Masmontet whilst Jasmine attended to Elliott, she saw that he was beginning to sleep naturally and relaxed with relief. She prepared a cooling herbal drink and waited for him to wake, then held it to his lips whilst he drank thirstily. He slept again and she rested her own aching head. Elliott was over the worst of his shock and he would soon be in command of himself again.

She dozed beside him and was asleep when he awoke, so that he stared at her for a long time before pulling himself free of sleep. He looked into her pale face with the shadows like bruises under her eyes and her hair in tangled curls across her forehead. She looked like a vulnerable child again and Elliott wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her gently, even as he comforted himself.

Her eyes flew open and she stared, almost sightlessly, into his; then, as they focussed, he watched her blinking a little and the dark lashes fluttering like fans in front of her eyes.

'Oh,' she said, moving her cramped limbs. 'You're awake.'

'You look like a gypsy again,' he told her softly.

'So do you.'

He was unkempt and there was stubble on his chin, which he usually kept shaven.

'We had better be gypsies,' he added. 'It is a long way home and we must go back now without delay. André must be told that he is now the Comte de Castillon-Cazals and heir to . . . to certain possessions,' he finished lamely. He thought about the Crystal Heart for which he was still responsible and knew that he would have no rest

until the famous diamond was back in André's possession.

'We must continue to be gypsy entertainers,' he decided, 'whether there is anyone to entertain or not. We must be what we seem. There is still danger and many barricades to pass through, as we found on our journey here, and we must not delay.'

'No, Elliott,' she agreed wearily. 'I'm glad you are better.'

There was no word of thanks for her or even Lachie, she thought dully, even though she had worked so hard to pull him back from illness and depression. She had done all the nursing herself, refusing Lachie's help, but the other man had done so much to keep them comfortable.

'I am hungry,' Elliott said as he washed the foul taste from his mouth with her herbal mixture.

'I will prepare food for us,' she nodded, then turned to him hesitantly.

'I'm sorry . . . about Anne-Marie.'

'Are you?' he asked coldly.

'Yes.'

'You did not know her.'

'I am sorry for you.'

'I'm tempted to give you the lie,' he said harshly.

She flushed as she remembered how often she had reviled the unknown girl and had used her knowledge of gypsy folklore to take Elliott's love away from Anne-Marie and direct it towards herself. Her soul writhed at the thought of her past mischief now that her incantations had borne fruit. But although Elliott had lost Anne-Marie, he would not turn to her, nor would it make any difference if he did. He would never marry a gypsy.

'I tell the truth,' she said, and his voice softened.

'Thank you. Now we'll put it into the past and not talk

about it. We have to think about the future.'

Elliott had not experienced undue apprehension over the diamond as they travelled south, but now it became a huge responsibility. He determined to do his best to take each day as it came and to be ever vigilant and to use himself, Lachie and Jasmine in whatever way he thought fit in order to return the stone to André.

'We will travel again at dawn,' Elliott decided, 'and try to make the best progress we can.'

'Some gypsies travel during the night,' Jasmine reminded him; she could not wait to return home.

'So do some soldiers,' said Elliott. 'But I would prefer to travel by day, when I can see where I am going. We leave at dawn.'

That night Jasmine barred her door against him even though he gave it a peremptory knock. She was not yet ready to be used by Elliott as a substitute for Anne-Marie, and the dead girl seemed to hover between them. She was still very much in Elliott's life and Jasmine wanted to be everything to him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jasmine had not forgotten that part of the country. It transported her into a strange world of fantasies where she seemed to know every bend in the road and every contour of the countryside.

They had made good progress from Masmontet and their gypsy appearance was now so authentic that none questioned it. Near Chalais they had encountered another gypsy family on the move and Jasmine had greeted them eagerly, using the Romany tongue. She had referred to Elliott as her '*rom*', who was very silent, and rough with her, and she told them Lachie was very shy as he nodded and smiled to them.

Jasmine's ready tongue clacked enough for all three and the women clustered round her, admiring the dancing dress and showing some of their own skills in the beaded belts which they made. She had told Elliott to remain silent and now his glowering looks told their own tale. Jasmine shrugged and looked appealingly at the other gypsies, who laughed with sympathy.

'He is a stern man,' she said. 'He will not have me talk to anyone else.'

She turned to Elliott after they had gone.

'There is an encampment towards the north-west, a few miles from here. If we are stopped at a barricade we will

say that we are going to meet those friends. They will believe us.'

'You jabber like a monkey,' he said sourly.

He had not enjoyed being put to such scrutiny and laughed at by such a tribe.

Soon Jasmine was once again experiencing a sense of *déjà vu* as they passed through the same part of the countryside which had affected her previously, and she felt herself to be in the grip of some strange excitement.

'I *know* this bridge over the stream,' she told Elliott. 'I have dreamed of it. If we take the road to the left we will reach a small village and there is a white house with green shutters. Oh Elliott, can't we go to look? It isn't far.'

'No, we cannot,' he told her curtly. 'We lose enough time as it is whilst you gossip with others of your ilk. I grow weary of being stopped at every turn and making such slow progress that it will be months instead of weeks before we reach Glenlacie. They will be mourning us, thinking we are dead.'

She was silent as they crossed the bridge, then suddenly she gripped his arm.

'You go on, but I *must* see the house which I dreamt about. I shall run to the village and look, then I shall run after you. I can run fast as I showed you in Paris.'

She leapt to the ground, but Elliott leapt after her and overtook her before she had time to get away from him. He slapped her hard across the cheek, his face as black as thunder.

'I told you once before that you will *not* run away from me,' he shouted. 'Must you forget every lesson you have been taught.'

She put a hand to her cheek and her eyes blazed with green fire.

'You will not punish me again,' she said in a low voice. 'You said that if you reached the château at Castillon-Cazals safely, and I helped you, then I could have my freedom. Well, I claim that freedom, *and* the right to order my own life.'

'I said you would have your freedom as soon as we returned to Glenlacie,' he told her.

'I want it now! I want to see that house and I shall scream out your true identity at the next *barrier* if you don't help me.'

'If you do, I shall kill you.'

'I don't care whether you kill me or not! I am not afraid of you! I *must* know if I am dreaming and why I have dreamed of such a house. I must know who lives there.'

His mouth twisted with anger, but he called to Lachie to bring the caravan.

'We will waste another hour,' he cried furiously 'to chase a dream. A dream! Sometimes I think I live through a nightmare and it has lasted ever since I set eyes on this gypsy woman. Now she blackmails me and we have to dance to her tune. But this is the last time! Do you understand?'

'I understand,' she agreed, 'but I still want to look for that house.'

Jasmine's fingers dug into Elliott's arm as they travelled along the twisting road which she had so often seen in her dreams. Occasionally she would look, perplexed, at some dwelling or a clearing and shake her head, muttering, '*Non, non . . .*' Then again the road would turn and she would nod and relax. The peasants and villagers turned to stare at them as they travelled past and this time it was Elliott who grew stiff and alert. He felt menace reach-

ing out towards them and he caught Jasmine by the hand.

'Let's get away from here,' he said. 'These people fear us. They think we are spies. I heard the word mentioned twice.'

'Soon . . . soon,' she said. 'Just a little way through the village, then we come to the outskirts and the white house . . .'

It stood there, silent and forlorn, just as she had predicted, its green shutters barred and one or two broken, having fallen sideways against the patchy white of the walls. The house was empty and desolate, but it still bore the air of past opulence and grandeur in its fine graceful lines and the parkland in which it stood.

'It is there!' Jasmine breathed. 'And I remember it.'

'What do you want, gypsy?'

An elderly couple had come out of the cottage which stood in the grounds, the man in ragged breeches and leggings, the woman in a heavy black dress, patched and almost green with age, its once-fine lacy collar tattered.

Jasmine stared at the woman. 'Who lives in the house?' she asked, pointing.

'Go away,' the man said. 'We will have no truck with you.'

Elliott sprang to life, his stature of Master of Glenlacie now much in evidence.

'Who owns yonder mansion?' he asked. 'Rest easy, we do not intend to make our habitation there.'

'It was owned by Monsieur and Madame Vinsonnaud,' the woman said sullenly. 'Monsieur has been dead for four years and Madame died a few months ago. Monsieur le Curé shut up the house, but we are caretakers.'

'You neglect it,' said Elliott contemptuously. 'The shutters are broken.'

'They were broken when Madame lived there. Paul, my husband, need not mend shutters for such people.'

'What about their children?'

The woman shrugged. 'A daughter who married a foreign gentleman from England. They used to stay with Madame, then one day they went away and did not return. Madame had a letter from England to say they were dead. They come no more.'

'And there was no other relative?' asked Elliott, looking at Jasmine who seemed to be turned to stone. She was standing stiffly beside him, her face like ivory.

'I do not remember,' the woman muttered. 'I do not remember any other relative.'

Elliott nodded, satisfied. No doubt Monsieur le Curé would pursue the matter and perhaps find some relative of the Vinsonnauds and the lovely old house might come to life again one day, when all the upheaval, terror and suspicion had died and France lived once more.

'Come, Jasmine,' he said. 'We must resume our journey. Thank you, Madame . . . Monsieur. We were interested to hear the story of the house.'

He pulled Jasmine's arm, but she shook herself free as a child might do.

'*Grandmère . . .*' she said. '*Jessamée . . .*'

The woman suddenly started and her eyes flew to the girl. She came forward to look more closely into her face.

'*Jessamée . . .*' Jasmine repeated.

This time the woman drew back and crossed herself, and the man also moved forward to scrutinize Jasmine.

'There was a grand-daughter called *Jessamée*,' he said, 'a little girl with bright hair who played in the parkland with Madame. She—'

'Be quiet, fool,' his wife hissed, and he fell back. 'It is a long time ago, Monsieur,' she said woodenly.

‘How long?’

‘Twelve years. The child was small. She had no more than five years.’

‘*Grandmère’s* black dress . . .’ Jasmine whispered. Again the woman’s face paled.

‘If you knew Madame, then you should know me. I took care of her for years, such a fool I was, and Paul looked after the house and drove the carriage. We were not so fine as Monsieur and Madame! Oh no! They gave us work to do and we were fed and given our coins, but they lived in plenty whilst we were poor. But the people are no longer the servants. France belongs to the people now.’

‘And who feeds and clothes you and gives you coins to spend?’ asked Elliott. ‘Are you wealthy now?’

‘*Grandmère*,’ Jasmine repeated, touching the woman’s dress.

‘Perhaps she puts the evil eye on us,’ whispered the old woman, shrinking back. ‘Madame gave me the dress to wear. I did not steal it.’

‘We do not accuse,’ said Elliott, then put his hands firmly on Jasmine’s shoulder. He did not like the attention they were attracting.

‘Come on, Jasmine. We bid you good-day, Madame . . . Monsieur . . .’

‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!’ the woman shouted, but the cry was not taken up further.

Elliott was glad to leave the village. Jasmine was so quiet and so strange that he decided to make camp before they had travelled far.

Her head had begun to throb and she held her face in her hands.

‘What do you remember?’ Elliott asked. ‘Do you think you are the grand-daughter called Jessamée?’

She shook her head, and sat down saying that she felt faint.

'I . . . I only remember *Grandmère*,' she said. 'I feel sick.'

'There is a small amount of spirits left,' said Elliott. 'Drink this.'

She drank it obediently, and the liquid fire spread to all parts of her body.

Elliott looked at her white face with concern. Could it be that Jasmine had originated from that fine old house? Yet how had Judd and Rima found her? What had happened to her?

Now and again Jasmine seemed to have flashes of memory, then she would press her face into her hands and the sickness would be upon her again.

'It is not my dream,' she said. 'It is my dream gone wrong. It is my dream which has broken into little pieces and gone into decay. Everything is old and horrible . . . And I did not dream about Monsieur and Madame Paul. I do not remember them. I . . . I can't remember clearly.'

Elliott held her in his arms that night and comforted her as he would a child, stroking her soft hair. He was becoming convinced that she was no gypsy child, and as the suspicion grew in him, so he found that he could not use her as he had used the girl he had bought with guineas.

The feeling of menace he had experienced ever since they began their return journey was now very strong in him. He felt that the countryside was too quiet, and there were not enough officers of the law patrolling the roads. He had chafed under their probing questions whenever they had been stopped at the barricades, but always they had been satisfied that the wandering gypsies were no enemies of the people, and they had been allowed to pass

freely. He had his safe-conduct papers if their story was not believed, and proof of his service to the patriots, but those papers were hidden on his person and were only to be used in an emergency.

That emergency came the following morning when they were all roughly awakened from their sleep in the caravan and told to dress. A group of men armed with muskets stood around and one or two examined the inside of the caravan which was less than tidy since Jasmine had not been well for a few days, and Elliott too concerned for her to bother about being tidy.

Now the men threw out all usable items to one another and dealt contemptuously with the rest which was too poor for the use of free people.

‘They are no gypsies,’ one cried.

‘*I am* a gypsy!’ cried Jasmine. ‘See—I am a dancing girl.’ She hurried into the caravan and found her costume, but one of the men pulled the dress roughly from her hands and threw it back into the caravan. They motioned Lachie to unharness the horse whilst leading forward the old pony, and one of them laid claim to the animals.

Elliott cursed himself for a fool and made a wild leap to recover his pistol, but he was too late and two shots rang out.

Horried, Jasmine watched as Lachie and Elliott fell to the ground. Then a lighted torch was thrown into the caravan. Jasmine screamed with terror, then found herself being picked up and thrown in after the torch.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Another torch was thrown and the caravan filled with smoke so that Jasmine's lungs felt as though they were on fire. Far away she could hear raucous laughter, and she grabbed at a bundle she had made up, when they reached the coast of France, to be used in case of emergency. It contained food and clothing should they ever have to flee, and she held it to her then rolled on the floor of the caravan. Incongruously she was wearing the head-dress of her gypsy costume but one of the torches had landed near the dress and now it burned almost as brightly as the sun.

Smoke was billowing everywhere and Jasmine crawled through it, almost invisible with Lady Anne's cloak round her. She stuffed the head-dress into her bosom, feeling that she wanted to cling to some small part of her memories, and tried desperately to reach Elliott. But it was Lachie who lay nearby and Jasmine had seen enough of death to know that he was beyond help.

Near crazed, she crawled forward as, with a roar, the caravan burst into flames and shot a myriad of sparks into the cold morning air. The heat almost scorched Jasmine's back, as she moved towards the prone figure of Elliott.

Blood was pumping from a wound which had torn his shoulder, but Jasmine ripped her petticoat and pressed the pad into the wound. She reached for and found her

emergency bundle, lifting out a bottle of herbal juice she had packed; then, sick and faint, she crawled back to the prone figure and poured the cleansing liquid into the wound and bound it up with cleaner linen.

Using all her strength she dragged Elliott to the shelter of some trees and then staggered back for her precious bundle. Even as she laid hold of it, she saw that the caravan was going to keel over and she dragged herself away. She cried aloud as the burning caravan crashed down on the dead figure of Lachie.

From nearby she could hear the cheering of the men who had turned to watch the spectacle, and she grew violently sick as strange odours reached her nostrils. Feeling as though she could die, she lay on the ground whilst the world reeled about her for an eternity.

The initial fierce blaze passed, but the caravan still burned with steady heat, and the tears ran down her cheeks, making rivulets of white on her blackened face.

A low groan from Elliott reached her, and she rose and struggled over to where he lay. His head was moving and she thanked God he was alive, but again he slipped into unconsciousness. She lay beside him, gasping in the cold morning air; her chest and lungs seemed to have been scorched inside and out. Retrieving her emergency bundle again, she blessed the day when it had occurred to her to pack it, and the Divine Providence which had made her clear-headed enough to find it. She thought about Lachie and her heart swelled with pain; she began to sob painfully in deep, searing gasps. She had loved Lachie. He had been quiet and gentle and had taught her a great deal about self-discipline. Now she seemed to hear his slow voice telling her not to waste time on him, since he was beyond help, but to apply herself to helping the master.

Jasmine drank some of her herbal mixture and felt a little better. There was a small stream nearby and she crawled there and washed her smarting face in the cold water, and cleaned the blackened smoke from her hands. Then she wet a rag and went to wipe Elliott's face and to wash the blood from his arm. What was she to do, she wondered. Where could she go? She could go nowhere whilst Elliott lay there completely helpless. The only sensible thing she could do was to drag him further into good cover and try to nurse him until he was a little better.

The armed men might easily return to admire their handiwork, but for the moment there was no sign. She did not know that months of violence and hatred had almost sated them so that they no longer took the same pleasure in the destruction of travellers' possessions. Their lawlessness was too commonplace to be enjoyed to the full.

Jasmine thanked God for her gypsy life. She found mosses to pack into Elliott's wound, and there was sustaining, if not exactly appetizing food in her bundle as well as extra clothes. She poured herbal mixture into Elliott and warmed him with her cloak and her own body as night fell. He grew feverish and she sponged his forehead, and often he would cry out to her, and to Anne-Marie. Sometimes he muttered uneasily and she could only make out the words 'crystal heart'. Here she could not help him. She did not know about any 'crystal heart', and if he had kept such a thing in the caravan, it was now lost to him for ever.

By the third day Jasmine was growing very depressed, feeling that she was only waiting in a long drawn out fashion for eventual death—if not from exposure, then at the hands of some stray soldiers, or even dragged to the

nearest city and sacrificed to Madame Guillotine. The thought made her renew her efforts to revive Elliott, but she could see that he was very ill. The wound was not healing as it should. It was big and jagged and he had lost a great deal of blood.

As the day wore on, her quick ear sharpened to the sound of a breaking twig and her senses were attuned to movement in the woods behind her. She waited, still as a mouse as the stealthy movement came nearer, then suddenly a small boy peeped from behind a tree—a boy with black gypsy hair and a colourful scarf round his neck.

Jasmine called to him softly in the gypsy tongue, and he came slowly forward to look at her. She repeated the words, but he only stared at her stolidly, then turned and vanished once again into the woods.

The harsh tears wrenched at her throat again and ran painfully from her eyes. Elliott was going to die if she did not get help. She needed other herbs, different from the ones she had packed, but there were none that were suitable in the vicinity. If it remained untreated, the wound would soon go black and the poison would spread throughout his blood, and his fever would be too high to allow him to live.

Her own body ached with cold as she piled clothing on top of him, and she shivered in the biting winds. She ate sparingly and longed to be back in her bedroom at Glen-lacie with Meg bustling in to bath her in warm scented water. How could she ever have resented being shut in that room? She had been loved and spoiled and fed and pampered, and Elliott had looked after her like a younger sister instead of a girl he had bought. She loved him more than she loved life itself, and she would give her life for him. If anyone came, they would have to kill her before they tormented him.

They came in the late afternoon: two silent black-haired gypsies with swarthy faces, but with kindness in their eyes as they looked at Jasmine who spoke to them in Romany.

'You are gypsy?' one asked. 'And the man?'

'My *rom*.'

'He is gypsy?'

'He is gaujo, but friend to the gypsies. The other gaujos from the village have tried to kill him and have plundered and destroyed our verdo. They took our horses and killed our friend who was also a traveller.'

The gypsies' eyes grew hard with anger. It was a great crime to steal gypsy horses.

'My *rom* is dying,' said Jasmine simply. 'They shot him and the wound is bad.'

'We will take him. The child said a man lay sick. We have brought a plank.'

They laid Elliott on a wooden structure, and one of them helped Jasmine to bundle up her belongings and supported her as she began to stumble through the woods. She remembered that the gypsies they had met had told her about an encampment nearby, and now she knew she had found it.

She was almost too tired and broken to do more than mumble her thanks which the gypsies shrugged off. If another gypsy needed help, it would be there, though the gaujo could die as soon as he wished so far as they were concerned. But he belonged to the English gypsy and they did not object to saving him for her.

As she stumbled into the once-familiar type of encampment, Jasmine fell to her knees. An ancient crone with parchment skin came to look at her.

'You are in trouble, daughter?' she asked in Romany.

'We have lost our verdo. My *rom* has been shot and our

belongings have been plundered and burned. My friend who was a father to me is dead. He was a traveller and the son of a traveller.'

Jasmine looked into the black eyes which softened even as they looked at her with suspicion.

'You speak as a Romany but you are not of our blood.'

'I became the daughter of Romanies in England when I was a child. I . . . I do not know what I am.'

The house with the green shutters and the woman who wore a black dress with a lace collar had receded into her dreams once more.

'She is the one,' the old crone said, turning to one or two of the other gypsies, and it was only later that Jasmine realized the significance of the remark, and came to know what it meant. For a moment the whole of her thoughts were concentrated on Elliott, who lay near a blazing fire, his breath rasping in his throat.

'I had not got the medicines,' said Jasmine with distress. 'Rima, my mother, taught me but I could not find the herbs.'

'Rest easy, daughter,' the old woman said. 'He is strong. We will care for him.'

Jasmine's world began to spin again and she felt herself falling forward.

'Send word that she is here,' she heard one of the women command, and she wanted to cry out in protest, but she could not speak.

Strong arms laid hold of her, then there was only blackness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jasmine was dreaming that she was in the caravan and Rima was shaking her awake to eat a platter of stew flavoured with herbs such as only a gypsy would use. The smell of it was still in her nostrils as she dragged herself awake and found a young girl staring at her broodingly.

'My grandmother says you have to eat,' she told Jasmine. 'Here is your food.'

'Thank you.'

Jasmine's head ached and her eyes felt as though she had been burying her head in the sand, but hunger also gnawed at her and she was glad to eat the rabbit stew. It was the first real gypsy food she had tasted since she had been sold by Judd; she did not enjoy the first mouthfuls and could understand why Elliott had not developed a taste for it and had insisted that she cook his food according to his taste. Soon, however, she grew used to the flavour and ate with enjoyment. She saw the girl watching her with no friendliness in her black eyes.

'What is your name?' she asked.

'Marisa.'

'My name is Jasmine.'

The girl did not answer, but continued to stare at her sulkily. Jasmine's first thought had been for Elliott and she had been soothed quickly by a word from the

old woman that he was no worse.

'How do I call your grandmother?' Jasmine asked as she watched the old crone hobble into a tent. This party of gypsies who travelled the Continent were certainly poor people.

'Alesha. And my grandfather is Carlo.'

Jasmine looked at the old man who smoked his pipe by the fire. His grey hair straggled from under an ancient woollen cap and his face was the colour and texture of old leather.

'My brother is Pepito. It was he who found you.'

'He saved our lives,' said Jasmine simply. 'I would like to see my husband now.'

'Alesha says you rest. The gaujo's head has been wounded and his mind has gone to the fairy creatures. Alesha gives him drugs to make him sleep, but he will not remember you for a long time. He asks for Anne-Marie.'

Marisa's eyes had a wicked gleam in them when she saw that Jasmine's eyes dropped at this news. So the gaujo husband had another woman!

'She is dead,' said Jasmine flatly. 'She was killed in an accident.'

'My father killed my mother because she lay with other men,' said Marisa.

'Where is he now?' Jasmine asked.

Marisa shrugged. 'Who knows? The grandmother takes care of Pepito and me, and the uncles and their wives travel with us. We should not have come to France. They chop off heads, even their King's, and, they say, the Queen's, too.'

Jasmine shivered. 'I hate the guillotine,' she said.

'I have not seen the guillotine. Always we avoid the towns and cities because the grandmother says there is no food and no alms, but I would like to watch the guillotine

at work, if we must be in France. It is entertainment.'

'It is horrible.'

'You are soft for a gypsy girl. Your *rom* must be a soft man.' Marisa's black eyes gave her a baleful scrutiny.

'He is only soft because he is sick. He is a strong man.'

Old Alesha was returning with an empty cup in her hands, and she came to look down on Jasmine who was lying on a bed which, she found out later, belonged to Marisa.

'You look better, my daughter.'

'I am well,' Jasmine assured her. 'Where is my bundle? I must find clothing to wear.'

'It is safe. You will rest until your courses are clear. The *rom* has not given you children?'

Jasmine turned scarlet. 'No.'

'Did he marry you in one of the big, rich Christian churches, daughter?'

'No,' said Jasmine.

'Then you mingled blood and jumped the broomstick?'

Jasmine's blushes came and went. 'We . . . we did not have a ceremony,' she admitted. 'We bought a *verdo* and lived in it together as husband and wife, and I danced whilst he played for me. We are as one.'

The old woman's eyes cleared. 'It is well,' she said. 'He is not your true *rom*.' She turned to Marisa and hurled abuse on her for lounging around when there was work to be done. The girl rose to her feet, looking down at Jasmine sulkily before flouncing away.

'I could be helping,' Jasmine said.

'Your turn will come. The girl is lazy and I will ask Carlo to beat her. You have earned your keep for a few days with rye, meal and salt from your bundle. I will make a gruel for your *rom*.'

'I want to see him.'

'Tomorrow. The head wound is bad.'

'I did not see it.'

'You were too shocked perhaps. It is under his soft gaujo hair, behind his ear. It will make his head ache and sometimes he will remember, but often he will forget. He speaks strange words.'

'He is from Scotland.'

'Ah. Scotland . . . ' The old woman nodded, satisfied. He was not from the Continent and little should be expected from him.

The work of the camp went on during the day whilst the woman cleaned and mended what ragged clothing they possessed, and the men roamed the woods for game and picked up anything which could be bartered for food or clothing.

In the evening the gypsies became mellow; they drank wine which they had found or stolen, and even old Alesha became merry and skittish, telling Carlo that he must make them feel young again and play his violin. In happier days he had earned enough to keep them in plenty when he played his gypsy music, and Jasmine could hardly refrain from leaping up and dancing to his music. By day he was a shrivelled nut of a man, but by night he was a satyr with black sparkling eyes and the lilt of music in his fingers. Then, as they grew tired, the tempo changed and sobbed out all the loneliness and agony of the gypsy way of life; the searching for something which always eluded them and the love which bound them one to another, a love which could quickly turn to hate at a turn of the head or a shrug of the shoulder.

Jasmine found that her eyes were moist with tears. She wept again for Lachie, and for Elliott, then for herself. She should thank the gods for being in this encampment, instead of lying in death beside Elliott near their burned

out caravan. But Elliott seemed to have gone miles away from her. He often called for Anne-Marie and his body was still racked with fever, even though old Alesha had commanded Pepito to find a toad and was resorting to ancient gypsy magic spells in order to drive the devils from Elliott's body.

Jasmine looked at the dark faces lit by firelight glow. They were her people, yet not her people. She had been too long away from their influence. She thought about Glenlacie and Lady Anne, and André. If only she had her place with them. But when she had lived there, she had been in a privileged position because Elliott had needed her and ordered that she be cared for diligently. Now her usefulness to him in that direction was over. She could no longer dance for him whilst he played the tambourine, and the gold he had brought to France was now delivered.

But how was she to get Elliott home? First of all he must be made well and perhaps that would be happiness enough.

The violin sobbed into silence and Alesha rose and swayed drunkenly, then staggered off to bed.

Jasmine rose early next morning and looked for her bundle which appeared to have been thoroughly plundered, though some items of clothing were left to her. Her last remaining link with her beautiful dancing costume had gone with the disappearance of the pretty head-dress decorated with its circle of brilliants, gold and silver embroidery and beautiful beads. She felt anger and frustration at its loss, but decided to say nothing. Perhaps it was best that it should have gone.

She put on her clothes then went to the tent where Elliott was being nursed. One of Marisa's aunts sat beside

him as he threshed about restlessly. She was sponging his forehead with cooling liquid and Jasmine indicated that she would take over the task. The woman was Spanish and did not speak the Romany tongue. Silently she nodded and left the tent to go to her children who were now shouting for attention.

Jasmine dropped on her knees beside Elliott and pressed her lips to his hot forehead. As he turned aside she saw that his hair had been cut and another wound lay open, angry and foul-smelling, behind his ear. She had not noticed this injury before. The wound on his shoulder was better and less discoloured.

'If he is not well in a week, my daughter,' said old Alesha as she hobbled into the tent, 'we will carry him to the Curé and leave him on the steps of his Christian church. He will be cared for.'

'No!' cried Jasmine. 'I will nurse him.'

'Perhaps . . . unless things change for you . . .'

Jasmine's heart contracted with fear. She remembered the words she had overheard as she lost consciousness on the night they arrived. Word had to be sent to someone that she was here. To whom were they giving that message? Would the officers or the soldiers come for her? She had done nothing—but a great many people had done nothing, except be born at the wrong time and into the wrong society.

She remembered Elliott saying that he believed some people to have a death-wish that was almost irresistible at times.

'They are like lemmings, hurrying to be drowned, or the rabbit when it sees a snake, or the moth to the flame. There are those who cannot stand on a cliff-top without the urge to leap into the sea. Now there is the guillotine, and people walking to it with fascination, unable to resist

it. They are accused of nothing, and do not defend themselves. It calls to them and they walk towards it blindly.'

'Oh stop!' she had implored him, though deep in her heart she knew it was so. Madame Guillotine attracted as much as she repelled.

Now she looked at the old gypsy woman with fear. 'What can change for me?'

'Your way of life. It can change for people all the time. Even the gypsy sees change. As for you—'

Suddenly she was grabbing Jasmine's hand and staring into it, her claw of a finger tracing the lines.

'I do not think you are true gypsy,' she said.

'I do not know, Alesha.'

'But I can see that you have great troubles ahead, my daughter, and you will lose a loved one. Your heart will be empty and you will need courage, great courage. There is also violent death close to you.'

'That was Lachie.'

'Still to come,' Alesha said impatiently. 'I tell you so that you can prepare and be strong. It surrounds you and it centres on you. It will have a far-reaching effect on your life and will make great changes for you, but it is there, this death.'

'It is close to me?'

'Very close.'

Jasmine felt the cold clamminess of fear wrapping itself round her heart. Was Elliott going to die? What would happen to her if Elliott died? She had no one else. She could not go back to Judd and Rima.

That evening Elliott began to cry out in high fever, and this time he cried for Jasmine.

'Dance for me,' he entreated. 'Wear . . . your dancing

dress . . . head-dress. Dance for me, Jasmine.'

'What is it?' asked Alesha as his cries resounded throughout the camp.

'My dancing dress. He had it made for me and now he wants to see it.'

'Where is it?'

'Burned in the fire,' said Jasmine. 'I kept the head-dress as a souvenir because it was very pretty when it was newly made.'

'Wear it and dance. He may see it in the firelight and be soothed. We will lift him up to watch.'

'It was in my bundle, but it has gone,' said Jasmine.

Alesha's eyes brightened with anger.

'Marisa!' she cried. 'Bring me the dancing girl's head-dress.'

After a long moment whilst Marisa and her grandmother had a silent clash of wills, the girl flounced off again to return with the head-dress which was only a parody of its former glory. The embroidery was beginning to unravel and some of the brilliants and beads had fallen out of their setting.

'It is a poor thing now, but once it was beautiful. It can still sparkle in the firelight,' said Jasmine.

'Can you dance the *farruca*?' Alesha asked, and Jasmine nodded.

Soon Carlo had started to play and Jasmine was dancing the ancient gypsy story of a woman whose husband had grown tired of her and she is trying to make him love her once more, and taking drink to give herself more courage in her efforts.

The old woman laughed with delight even when the poor gypsy dancer is repulsed by the husband for being drunk. She applauded Jasmine's efforts and when the girl would have had done with dancing and run over to see to

Elliott, she called for another dance, and another.

'You *are* a gypsy!' she cried. 'You are a true gypsy dancer. None can dance like the true gypsy dancer.'

She made Carlo play faster and faster, rejoicing in Jasmine's flying feet until the girl finally stopped and refused to dance another step. Instead she rushed over to Elliott and knelt beside him, seeing that there was recognition in his eyes and the fever had cooled.

'Jasmine . . . ' he said. 'Put on your dress . . . your dress . . . '

'It has gone, Elliott,' she whispered and the words had a bad effect on him as he clutched her wrist.

'Get it for me. I want it. Find your dress . . . your dress . . . Find your dress . . . '

Tears started to her eyes.

'It was the fire. Don't you remember, Elliott? The fire burned our *verdo*, and my dress.' She pulled off the head-dress. 'This is all that is left. Do you want to hold it?'

His fingers clutched at it convulsively. 'Get your dress,' he muttered. 'I'll look after it for you.'

She opened his shirt and slipped the head-dress inside. 'There. That's my dress. You keep it, Elliott.'

'I will keep it,' he agreed drowsily, then drifted off to sleep again.

Alesha had grown admiring in her appreciation of Jasmine's talent and swore that she and her *rom* would stay in the encampment for as long as was necessary and would not be molested. She had to repeat this loudly, because already one or two of the men had looked at Jasmine with naked lust on their faces, and the Spanish woman was saying that Alesha had ordered the *ferruca* to be danced for her benefit. She shouted in Spanish which Jasmine could not understand, but which Marisa was happy to translate for her.

'She is jealous. Her man would take you, except that Alesha would kill him before his wife found her dagger. She insists on discipline in the camp.'

'I do not want any man,' said Jasmine.

'We should not have come to France,' Marisa repeated, off again on her usual whine. 'We do not go into towns and cities where I could find a man who would pay me in gold. I am worth gold.'

'Marisa! Surely Alesha—'

'Does not know.' The black eyes gleamed with amusement. 'She is old. She has forgotten what it is like to have heat in the blood. Here there are only the uncles.'

'But Marisa—'

'Oh rest easy. I do not cheat. Alesha would kill me too. In her younger days she used the whip and beat her children when the task should have fallen to Carlo. Now she does depend more on Carlo, though he uses his hands for the violin. She says he is an artist and must not be treated as other men, so as far as possible she takes on his tasks, though she now grows very old. She admires the artist. She admires you now that you have proved yourself a great dancer.'

'I don't know how I can find another dancing dress,' said Jasmine sadly.

'I might find one for you,' said Marisa casually. 'It might be fun to watch you dance for the uncles.'

'If I dance it will not be for the uncles. It will be for my *rom*,' said Jasmine firmly, and Marisa laughed, then laughed again.

'What amuses you?' Jasmine asked.

'I find life amusing sometimes,' said Marisa.

Next day there was a flurry of excitement as one of the uncles and his young son walked into camp.

With them they brought Miall Birch.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jasmine found Miall sitting beside her bed drinking warmed ale when her eyes flew open after a night of restless sleep. She was unrefreshed, but the sleep vanished in a moment when she stared into Miall's dark opaque eyes.

'Miall!' she cried. 'Miall Birch! How did you get here?'

'Did you think I would let you go so lightly, Jasmine?' he asked, grinning. 'The Master of Glenlacie might have seemed very brave ordering me away at the point of a gun, but I know how to bide my time. I hear he is a helpless invalid. I cannot see why you have not allowed him to die. It would make things very simple for us.'

Jasmine's heart leapt with alarm at the complacent note in Miall's voice; things were beginning to become clear to her.

'Did you pass round word that you were looking for me?' she asked. 'I did not think you would follow me to France.'

'I would follow you to Hell and back,' said Miall ardently, and once again she felt fear. There was menace mixed with love in his voice. He no doubt felt that Elliott had shamed him.

'How did you travel to France?'

'By packet to Jersey, then I found a fishing boat.'

'Oh Miall, couldn't we go back to England like that?' she asked eagerly. 'Could you help me to take the master home?'

Miall's eyes hardened into black ice. 'I've had a look at him. He is knocking on the door of Death. Why don't I help him through, Jasmine, then the world belongs to us? That man bought you when I had already marked you for myself. Judd Legh cheated me. I had already spoken to him about you and he did not tell you. It was already being arranged, but that rich man had more gold in his pocket and Judd Legh's eyes were greedy for gold. He sold you to Glenlacie.'

'But . . . but that's just what I mean, Miall,' cried Jasmine eagerly.

She was becoming more and more dismayed. Miall Birch was more than capable of murder, and the gypsies in this camp would turn a blind eye to what he did with Elliott. Old Alesha had come over to talk to her and obviously expected her to be wildly happy at the arrival of Miall. No doubt she had heard the story of how the Master of Glenlacie had bought her from her gypsy foster-father, just when she wanted to be married to her own choice, Miall Birch. He would have found a sympathetic ear in Alesha, who would be thinking that the great unhappiness she had seen in Jasmine's fortunes was because she belonged to Elliott, and the changes she was foretelling came about through Miall finding her again, and finding the Scottish gentleman too weak and ill to demand his rights.

Alesha had rewarded Jasmine well for dancing for her. Now she waited for the joy of seeing the lovers united.

'Why should we consider him?' Miall was repeating.

'Because we will be rich with a great deal of gold if we take him home to Glenlacie. He promised me my free-

dom and the right to . . . to find you if I wished, and gold enough to set us up for life. But we must get him back in good health. Why do you think I have been looking after him so well? Because I want my reward.'

Miall was looking at her suspiciously. 'You lie to me,' he said. 'The man has taken you and you cling to him because he has made himself part of you.'

'He bought me,' said Jasmine simply, 'and he took me, as was his right, but he could only take my body. The rest I have kept for myself.'

'I don't know why I want you,' Miall snarled, 'except that I hate him to have what is rightfully mine. But he has soiled you for me.'

'I belonged to him. I could not stand out against him.'

She could see the rage still working in him. With a sinking heart she realized that she would have to keep Miall interested in her if she was to save Elliott.

'I couldn't help it, Miall,' she said pleadingly. 'I would have come to you but you wished me to go back and steal for you. You know I offered myself to you. I was virgin then.'

'I should have taken you then,' said Miall. 'And I claim you now. But *he* will not stand in my way.'

'Of course he won't. He represents our riches, Miall. He has a great deal of gold. We have accomplished our mission now. He delivered the gold and we went to search for Anne-Marie, who was to be his wife. But she is dead, so now we head back to Glenlacie.'

'Without a wife for him,' said Miall. 'Perhaps you think you have a clear field then.'

'Do you think he would marry a gypsy dancer and make her Mistress of Glenlacie, one of the Scottish nobility?'

Jasmine did not have to pretend to her bitter tone and Miall smiled.

'No. He's too lofty for you, my love maiden. You will have me. We will jump the broomstick here and you will be my wife. I want you, but I will have you as it should be.'

'And . . . and the master?' she asked eagerly, so that his eyes narrowed again.

'You are more concerned over his weak bones than you are over our wedding. I can remember a time when nothing else would have mattered to you.'

'And I can remember a time when gold and riches mattered to you even more than I did,' said Jasmine boldly.

'We will take him home,' said Miall. 'The encampment is moving to Brittany. We will go with them and he can travel with us, then we will get him across the Channel. I've got a mule and cart which can take him to Glenlacie. But I tell you, Jasmine, if his gold is one guinea less than you promise, I will kill you. I have come to claim you, and to claim back my honour.'

'You are a true man, Miall,' said Jasmine admiringly.

But her heart seemed to bleed as she went to lean over Elliott and to look down on his well-loved face. Her eyes traced the strong noble lines of it, then she turned away as though shutting down a chapter of her life.

Now she must wed Miall Birch, whose uncouth manners had become repulsive to her, even though he had once caused her to weaken with love for him. She had thought him so strong and handsome, but now his strength was running to fat and his face had grown coarse, with evidence of drink in his hot dark eyes.

The camp was filled with gaiety as preparations were made for the wedding. The women adorned Jasmine in small items of apparel which were precious to them: there was a comb from the Spanish girl and a shawl from her sister-in-law; even Marisa had given her a bracelet, mak-

ing no secret of the fact that she envied Jasmine her man.

'He is strong, that one,' she said. 'He will not spare you. If he has any strength left when he has done, then maybe I will give him a sign, so long as Alesha does not catch me. You owe me that for having looked after you, gypsy dancer. You must not be greedy and keep him all to yourself.'

Jasmine was too heartsick to rise to the bait, though she pretended to laugh and tease Marisa.

'You must learn to dance,' she said slyly. 'Then the men can look upon your body and you will stir their imagination. The sweetest fruit is always a little out of reach, Marisa.'

'Yours had better be available,' Marisa countered. 'From the stories we have been told, yours has wasted its sweetness too long.'

Later Jasmine managed to seize a chance for a quick word with Elliott, who lay with flushed cheeks and flickering eyelids.

'I have to marry Miall,' she whispered. 'You remember Miall, Elliott? He will help me to get you home, my dearest master. You are lost to me now. I will have to be a good wife to Miall, but I have loved you. I will always love you.'

She choked on the last words and her tears fell on his hands.

'I wish you could hear me and understand.'

They had been alone, but now a shadow fell nearby and she got to her feet.

'My poor gaujo,' she said lightly. 'What a pity that he cannot dance at my wedding. He has been my *rom* and I have a fondness for him.'

Alesha shuffled forward. 'Forget him, daughter,' she said. 'Be a true gypsy and dance for us and for your true

rom . . . not a gaujo who does not marry you.'

She hobbled beside Jasmine, and led her to make her vows with Miall.

Often Jasmine thought that she had become a different person after she married Miall Birch. Her wedding night was a nightmare and afterwards she lay with her bruised body no more painful than her heart.

Miall had grown heavy and gross and his senses had been inflamed by drink and by the intoxicating effect of Carlo's violin as he alternately played wild gypsy dances, then strange unearthly gypsy tunes which wrung the heart.

Alesha had put Elliott to sleep with one of her brews, though for a long moment he had appeared to be awake and was looking at Jasmine with agony in his eyes. Sometimes she thought that his mind cleared now and again, but the weakness of his body did not allow him command of himself. She had looked at Elliott and was about to kneel beside him to listen to his muttered words when Alesha pushed her aside and held a cup to his lips. Afterwards he slept.

Miall and Jasmine had been afforded some privacy and as he lay beside her, she experienced revulsion enough to sicken her as he covered her mouth with his own. The smell of ale fumed from his breath and she would have given much to turn from him, but already he was upon her and taking her brutally so that she might well have been virgin as he tore into her soft flesh. She had thought that Elliott was brutal in his anger, but there had always been a certain delicacy in him which was absent in Miall, and now Jasmine felt as though she had been attacked by an animal. He was too drunk to care whether or not she responded and slept in his satisfaction, although she lay

wakeful and deeply unhappy beside him. Her life had become a great black void into which she dared not look, but she would live it willingly if only Elliott would recover.

The following day Miall scarcely left her side. He encouraged her to brush her hair and make herself attractive for him, as she had been when he met her in the woods of Glenlacie. She still had the ivory comb which Elliott had given her and which she constantly kept in her secret place on her person, and she combed out her hair into long rippling waves. That night Miall drank only sufficient to make him warm and when he lay with her she knew she would have to pretend to a love she did not feel.

With eyes closed in the darkness of the night, she tried to pretend that it was Elliott who held her, and thus satisfied Miall that she, in turn, was happy to receive him.

The next day the uncles, Alexis and Torm, sons of old Carlo and Alesha reported that a contingent of men were stationed nearby in an old farmhouse. Suddenly there was an air of restlessness about the encampment that was familiar to Jasmine. The gypsies found their mules and carts, packed up their few ragged belongings and prepared to depart, driven by some instinct which they neither recognized nor understood. Somehow they must reach Brittany, but if they hoped for a promised land and riches in plenty, they would be mistaken and would have to move on to yet another horizon which beckoned brightly.

Miall owned a cart and mule, having bought them from a gypsy in Normandy and they made Elliott comfortable on the cart.

'What will happen at the barricade?' Jasmine asked fearfully, and Miall shrugged. If the officers wanted Elliott they could take him, he implied.

‘They would take us, too,’ she reminded him. ‘And we would all be forced to climb the steps of the guillotine.’

‘We will say we do not know who he is,’ said Miall.

‘We would not get any reward either, and I want my money, Miall,’ she said in a hard voice. ‘I have not worked all this time for nothing.’

‘Already your tongue has a shrewish sound, wife,’ growled Miall, though there was pleasure in his eyes. Jasmine would be a good provider when he no longer felt like earning money. From somewhere she would find the wherewithal to keep them alive.

He relaxed lazily. ‘We can pour ale on his clothing and pretend he is drunk,’ he said. ‘He looks repulsive enough now. They will not examine a drunk gypsy too closely.’

Jasmine nodded, satisfied.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The gypsy procession began to make progress towards Poitiers and Saumur, seeing evidence at every turn of the unrest and violence which had rent the country asunder.

One day, after Miall had again found a cache of drink and swallowed enough to make him dull and stupid, Alexis helped Jasmine get him into the verdo. Afterwards they sat down together and talked.

'I don't understand what has happened to France,' Jasmine said.

'How should you, little one?' he asked. 'One must lay the blame at the door of many people. There were those who were greedy for power amongst the aristocracy, and those who were discontented politically amongst the middle classes.'

'And the poor peasants had to suffer.'

'They were not without blame,' Alexis shrugged. 'They would not use modern implements to farm the land. Always it was the old methods, cumbersome and slow, which kept them poor and fearful for their livelihood.'

'What happens now?'

'Who knows? Who can say?'

'I am glad we are not going back to Paris.'

'Ah . . . Paris,' said Alexis. 'She is a fair city. When all is over, Miall will bring you back to Paris and you will no longer be afraid of her. Then you will love her.'

He turned languorous eyes on her and she moved away. The unrest was not only in the country: it was communicating itself to the gypsies. Alexis had looked at Miall with contempt and his eyes were constantly on Jasmine's slender body. She had grown taller and her breasts were now well formed, and she carried herself like a princess.

Jasmine was constantly aware of the Spanish woman, the wife of Alexis, who glared at her with hatred in her eyes, and of Marisa who sauntered about the camp intent on mischief. But Jasmine hardly troubled herself with petty jealousies. Always there was Elliott to nurse, and soon the sight of her tending the sick man became such a familiar one that it was hardly noticed.

Whenever she could, Jasmine talked to him in a low voice.

'I'm taking you home, Elliott. I have married Miall but he means nothing to me. There is only you. But I need Miall in order to get you to safety. We are still in France and we are trying to reach the Brittany coast.'

They crossed the Loire at Saumur and bore north-west towards Rennes. Here Jasmine accompanied Marisa into the town and her heart turned to water as she again saw the terrifying guillotine, large and menacing against the skyline. She had to argue with the gypsy girl to force her to return to camp, since Marisa found the guillotine a great source of fascination and enjoyment.

Marisa looked at Jasmine sullenly, and later she disappeared out of the encampment. Jasmine realized that Miall, too, had disappeared.

'You tend the gaujo too well,' Alesha told Jasmine. 'Your *rom* goes hungry.'

'He can find food,' said Jasmine. 'He never goes hungry.'

'He needs more than food to satisfy him. He is virile.'
Jasmine flushed and said nothing.

Next evening Marisa sauntered around after they had made camp and her eyes were wicked and full of satisfaction as she stared boldly at Jasmine. Miall sat silent whilst his supper was being prepared.

'Perhaps Jasmine will dance for us tonight,' Marisa said, 'if the grandfather will play for her.'

Jasmine looked up at her, puzzled by the request. Marisa had no desire normally to watch her dancing, and usually made some jealous remark later, after she had stood in the shadows and watched men's reactions.

'Dance the *farruca*, Jasmine,' she drawled lazily. 'Dance it for Marisa.'

The Spanish woman neighed with laughter and Miall's face grew dark. But Alesha's face was grim.

Next day Marisa was nowhere to be seen. Towards evening she rejoined the other gypsies, silent as a wraith, with cruel red marks on her face and her eyes swollen with tears.

'Gypsies are a proud people . . . proud,' said Alesha. 'Sometimes they throw up rotten seed, then it must be taught a lesson. I am an old woman and will not see forty again, but I am strong and Carlo is strong. Do not think that because we are old that we no longer care what happens to our people. You will not dance the *farruca* again, my daughter. Instead Carlo will play for us.'

Slowly the gypsies made their way through Brittany where once again the desolation of the neglected countryside lay heavy on Jasmine's heart. They seemed to pass miles and miles of empty moorland, though occasionally they saw women working in the fields and men wearing

queer baggy breeches and leggings. The villages were squalid, with hovels which made Jasmine thankful at her own lot. Her life was not easy, but she had pride in herself, in the inner Jasmine whom she had felt that nothing could touch or degrade.

Jasmine knew that they would need money to bribe some smugglers' craft to take them to England and she hardly dared approach Miall, who had grown sour towards her ever since he had lain with Marisa. He should have married Marisa, thought Jasmine. They would have done well together. They were both animal in their passions.

At one time she had often felt aroused with passion for Elliott, but Miall had killed all feeling in her, and she found it hard to pretend that she welcomed him in love. At first he was bewildered and constantly reminded her of the old days when she would have run to him if Judd had not kept her locked up.

'You were made for me then, girl, and you know it,' he snarled at her, when in a thoughtless moment she had turned away from him.

'It is true,' she said.

'Then what is wrong with you? And why are you not breeding?'

The secrets glittered in Jasmine's eyes. Rima had taught her many things whilst Judd warmed himself with ale, and she knew how to prevent the conception of children she had no wish to bear. She would have borne Elliott's children with pride and glory, but he would not quicken her. Now Miall looked on her with suspicion. Had he married a barren woman?

'It is this country, Miall,' she told him. 'It is France. I . . . I feel that the sorrow and agony of this country finds an echo in my own heart. I cannot be happy here and

make love when so many people die and others are homeless and starving. I know there must be some who are well and strong, but I don't know them. I only know what I see, and I see the poor peasants and the mean suspicious faces of the officers. They all watch one another and are suspicious of everyone, even the gypsies.'

'We will leave France soon,' said Miall, 'but you'd better have no excuses when we get back to England. And you'd better see to it that *that* bag of bones—' he pointed to Elliott—'is worth every guinea you say he's worth, or it's going to be the worse for you.'

He strode away, and Jasmine sat down by Elliott's bedside wearily, then saw that his eyes were upon her and that his lips were moving.

'What is it, my heart?' she asked, and knelt down to listen.

'Gold,' he croaked, 'in . . . in belt. Pay for passage.'

Alesha had removed the leather moneybelt, saying that it chafed the gaujo's white skin. For a day or two Jasmine deliberated, then she went to find the old woman to ask for the belt to be returned. For once Alesha, who preached honesty in other gypsies one to another, had to struggle against herself in order to find the belt. It had a pouch for documents which did not interest her, and which also held the now-mangled head-dress which Elliott liked to keep.

'That is his luck,' she explained to Jasmine. 'You had better see that he keeps the charm, or ill-luck might befall you. I have not allowed the Spanish woman to touch it, though she fancied the beads to sew into an ornament for her hair. Her hair!' Alesha spat. 'She is a stupid one, is the wife to Alexis. She has other things besides beads in her hair.'

'The gaujo wants his belt,' said Jasmine briskly. 'To pay

the ferryman who will take us to England.'

'*You go to England. We stay,*' said Alesha. 'Maybe we make the Spanish woman happy and go to Spain. It will be good when the weather becomes hot.'

She stroked the belt lovingly.

'The gaujo would give you money for the belt because you have protected him,' said Jasmine, deciding to take a chance. If Alesha suddenly made up her mind that the belt rightfully belonged to her, then there was not much Jasmine could do about it, but since she had her own funny gypsy code, perhaps payment would resolve it. The old woman looked at her craftily.

'How much?'

'Two pieces.'

'There are ten.'

'Three.'

'No. *I* will keep the seven pieces of gold and give you the belt. Three pieces will buy your way to England. You can have three pieces.'

'We need money in England. We have to take the gaujo to Scotland, and that is many miles.'

'You can dance for pennies. They do not burn the soil in England. People with food to eat will give you coins for dancing.'

'Miall spends them on drink.'

Jasmine's voice was bitter and here Alesha looked at her with sympathy. She knew what the effects of drink could be and had drunk herself stupid at times in her younger days. It was she who had often ruined them, and Carlo who had looked after her and played his violin for more coins.

'I keep four. You shall have six,' she said firmly.

'Very well,' said Jasmine, and the bargain was struck.

Jasmine took back the belt to Elliott and strapped it to

his thin body. How wasted he was! The wounds were now mending, but his head was still sick and often he lay still for hours with a blank stare in his eyes.

Once Miall had caught her leaning over him and came to stare at the sick man with contempt.

'Anne-Marie . . . ' Elliott had croaked, and Miall gave a shout of laughter and slapped Jasmine's buttocks.

'He wants the high-born lady,' he chortled. 'No gypsy for the Master of Glenlacie! He's much too lofty.'

Jasmine had flushed and struggled to contain the tears of anger. She hated both of them! But later Elliott had caught at her hand as she came to feed him and his eyes were warm with intelligence.

'Thank you, Jasmine,' he whispered.

'Oh Elliott! You are yourself again! You know me.'

He smiled and she kissed him, but when she sat down and tried to talk to him, she could see the bewildered look dropping back over his face and he grew blank again. But it had encouraged Jasmine. Some day he would be well again, though it was too late for her.

Now she tried to tell him that she had paid Alesha for their shelter and their keep with his gold coins.

'I haven't stolen the money, Elliott,' she said, 'nor has Alesha. I paid her with your money. Do you understand?'

He looked at her dully, then his eyes flickered with intelligence.

'I paid the old woman, Alesha,' she repeated. 'Do you understand, Elliott?'

'Yes, I understand. Pay the boat . . . Find the master of a ship and pay him three gold pieces. Four, if he will take the horse and caravan.'

'The caravan and horse is . . . '

She bit her lip. Why tell him again what had happened? And if they could take their mule and cart to England,

it would help a great deal.

'Bribe with gold,' whispered Elliott. 'The smugglers would do anything for a gold piece and those are large coins. There are no goods to smuggle now from France.'

'I'll see to it, Elliott.'

She would have to get Miall to do the dealing but he was again drinking whatever wines and spirits he could find and would have ended in prison but for Alexis. In the end it was Alexis who found them passage on a ship which cost five gold pieces and who got Miall safely on board with them.

The seamen were suspicious of Elliott and showed it, but they were being paid to keep their mouths shut. Miall gradually sobered and Jasmine was secretly pleased to find that he was an even worse sailor than she. He was sick, and sick again, so that the sour ale no longer lay on his stomach and there had been no means of acquiring more.

For once he was sober, but his sobriety was now making him ugly and he would have insisted on his rights had he felt better. As it was he groaned as the heaving vessel crossed the Channel, and they were finally thrown ashore near Southampton, whilst the vessel got under way once more.

Jasmine knelt down and kissed the soil. She had never been so glad to see England.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sea air had helped Elliott and he began to struggle back to conscious living, though he still had long spells of oblivion. In one way Jasmine was glad about this. Miall would have been jealous of a whole man, and his jealousy and hatred might have grown greater than his greed so that he could have despatched Elliott at a stroke. But he could not be jealous of a poor skeleton of a man whose mind was not with them most of the time.

With part of the money which she begged, Jasmine bought some bright material and made herself a new dancing dress, then she began to dance in each town through which they passed. At first she clapped her hands to provide her own accompaniment, then she managed to buy an ancient tamourine from another gypsy family whom they met on the road. They had news of the Birches whom Miall had deserted in order to go to France and claim his wife, and they learned that the Birches were travelling in the north-east.

'We will find them after we dump this carcass,' said Miall. 'Then you can begin to be a proper wife to me instead of half a one, and half nursemaid to the gaujo.'

'Indeed I will, Miall,' Jasmine assured him, forcing a smile. 'It will be nice to be one of a family again—one of our own family, I mean, not a family from the Continent.'

'That's true,' said Miall and brightened.

For once Jasmine softened towards him. Poor Miall; it was not his fault that she no longer cared for him and no longer had any love for the gypsy way of life. He was doing his best with what he knew and understood. Sometimes he, too, had looked bewildered and she had compassion for him.

That night he was more gentle with her, so that she took pleasure in him for the first time. He was not in drink and they had stopped by a hill stream earlier to wash themselves and clean their clothes. Now he was less repulsive to her, and he felt her response and took pleasure in return.

'You'll be a fine wife for me, Jasmine,' he said, holding her fast. 'I'm proud of you. I'm proud that you can dance for me, but if you swell with my child, I will work for you. I can breed horses like my father and brother. We won't starve. If you are soft towards me, then maybe we will have children.'

Her eyes were secret in the darkness. *Never*, she thought; she would try to love him as best she could, but felt she could never love the children he would give her. She blessed Rima for giving her the knowledge; knowledge which she would keep secret from Miall. If he knew she was preventing his seed from flowering, he would kill her with beatings.

'It will be better when we find your people, Miall,' she said. 'It will be better then. We will have a great deal of money. You'll see.'

The winter had passed almost into spring when they finally crossed the border into Scotland. Jasmine decided that she would not dance any more but that they should make their way, with all possible speed, to Glenlacie.

They had little money or food, but Miall trapped rabbits and hares and Jasmine was once again cooking the rich gypsy stews which she found quite palatable once more.

The day they moved into Glenlacie territory, she could hardly move for the great sob which caught at her throat. Always they had travelled the country so that one place was much like another to her. There had never been any roots put down by the gypsies.

But now her whole body burned with love for Glenlacie, and she looked forward with eager anticipation to seeing Lady Anne again, and André who was now the Comte de Castillon-Cazals. She would have to break the news about his parents and Anne-Marie, and she would have to explain about Elliott, but she *had* returned him safely to his own home once more.

As she and Miall drove into the courtyard of the great house, a steward ran forward and ordered them straight out once more.

'Be off with ye!' he cried angrily. 'That ye should dare to bring your stinking cart to this fine place!'

'I bring your master,' cried Jasmine imperiously, 'and I wish to see your mistress.'

'What nonsense is this?' the man asked.

Jasmine looked at him closely. He was new, she did not recognize him.

'Lady Anne Cunningham,' she said, 'and Monsieur André.'

He paused to stare at her.

'The Lady Anne is at Greenlaw, and the gentleman has gone with her. Who are ye, gypsy, that ye should talk about Lady Anne?'

'Don't you know how the Master of Glenlacie left for France?' she asked.

The man looked disconcerted.

'Now he returns,' said Jasmine whilst Miall came to stand beside her.

'That's never the maister,' the man said as Elliott struggled to sit up, then collapsed.

'Fetch Meg!' cried Jasmine. 'Fetch Meg Balfour.'

One of the servants rushed inside without referring to the new steward, and minutes later Meg came hurrying out to the courtyard.

'Mercy on us!' she cried. 'It's never the wee gypsy lass, Miss Jasmine! Oh, but once a gypsy, aye a gypsy. Ye're as dirty as a tyke again, and me scrubbing ye clean as the day ye were born. Is the master following on?'

'Never mind your questions, Meg. The master is here,' said Jasmine. 'Get him to bed.'

'The master . . . ?'

Meg turned white when she saw Elliott. 'Merciful heaven,' she whispered. 'I can hardly see him for dirt. Aye, and he . . . Oh, dearie me, he looks close to the end.'

'He's been worse,' said Jasmine. 'I must see Lady Anne. I have news for her and Monsieur André. Bad news, I'm afraid, Meg.'

'It looks as though there's nothing but bad news. Lady Anne had to go home. There was business needing her attention. Alexander Lawson, the steward, is ill with his chest and Lady Anne hired James Laidlaw for Glenlacie. Oh dear, but I'm so thankful that Master Elliott is home.'

'Send for Lady Anne, Meg, please. There is business to be done here, too, then I must be away.'

Meg gave the orders for Elliott to be taken to his room and he was borne away. Jasmine and Miall still waited in the courtyard.

'I . . . I don't know about your old room, Miss Jasmine,' said Meg doubtfully, weighing up Miall after the

girl had introduced him as her husband. 'I don't know I'm sure.'

'Oh, we'll stay in the woods,' said Jasmine, 'but we need food, and the master promised to pay me for the journey. That's why we wait for Lady Anne.'

'And Lachie?'

'Dead,' said Jasmine in a low voice.

'Oh my poor Lachie! But we'd thought ye were all dead. Lady Anne will get such a shock to see ye. Ye understand. I've no real authority here, Miss Jasmine.'

'*Please* send for Lady Anne,' Jasmine pleaded. 'I will not leave Glenlacie until I've seen her.'

The next few days were long and arduous for Jasmine. Miall looked at her first of all with disappointment that the hoped-for gold was not immediately handed to her, then with suspicion in case she had not been telling him the truth. However, he remembered that it was in these woods that he had seen her after she came to Glenlacie and he thought about her fresh young beauty when she had come to talk to him, and how love for him had glowed in her eyes. Now she looked pale and tired and he was no longer so pleased with his bride, but he tried to love her gently in order to recapture that earlier time and was disappointed again when she did not respond as he would have wished.

'You would go back again to that old woman if you could,' he said sulkily. 'She called you "Miss Jasmine" and because of her you have been thinking yourself a lady born. Well, you are only a gypsy wife—and a poor one in my reckoning. If you were a good gypsy wife then you would be better than any lady born. It's time we found my people; then my mother and sister Lanny can teach you how to treat a good husband.'

Jasmine listened to his grumblings with only half an ear.

She was now realizing that she had probably seen Elliott for the last time, and the knowledge was like a hard stone in her heart. Meg had said that the master's bedroom was always kept ready for him, and his serving man had carried him away. Now he would be nursed properly and would grow well and strong again one day, but he was out of her life. Now all that remained was for her to collect the gold.

She had to go each day to the kitchen to beg food for herself and Miall, and had to stare boldly at the servants who would have driven them away on the orders of the steward, James Laidlaw, had not Meg spoken for her and said that Lady Anne would be angry because Jasmine had news which would be important to them.

Miall did not find the food much to his taste, but he was too lazy to find any game, and after a day or two he disappeared into the woods towards the nearest town. After he had gone, Jasmine found that her most precious possession, the ivory comb which Elliott had given her, had been taken and she lay on the ground and wept. Distracted, she had grown careless in looking after it.

But the theft of her comb brought back some of the spirit which she had lost. She grew angry and full of that inner pride and fire which made her as strong as a piece of slender steel. She hated Miall. She had been prepared to try to love him and perhaps even settle down to be a proper wife to him. She might even have considered bearing his children. But now she hated him and she knew that she could find clever ways of punishing him for taking the thing which was most dear to her.

He came back full of drink and raging with anger against all gaujos, and would have beaten her if she had not prepared herself with a heavy piece of wood and threatened to lay his head open.

'Touch me, and I shall swing this at your head,' she said. 'You are drunk and cannot defend yourself.'

Miall quietened and her lip curled with contempt. He was a coward and quickly routed if one stood up to him. If it had been Elliott when he was well, he would have found some way of taking the stick from her and no doubt he would have beaten her with it. But she would have respected him.

Miall snored in drink the next day and Jasmine spent a few hours by herself in a place she loved. Spring was now well on its way and the woods were carpeted with snowdrops and early primroses. The winter at Glenlacie had been mild and already the soft new growth was reaching out tentative fingers, preparatory to bursting forth in all its glory.

Jasmine put her arms round the tree trunks and hugged herself against them out of sheer love. She danced amongst them in a small clearing and washed her face and hands and hair in a brook, even though she had no comb with which to tease out the tangles. She would buy a new one after Lady Anne gave her the gold.

Meg had looked with horror at her tattered gown and Jasmine explained that the rest of her clothes had been burned in the fire. Meg found an old but clean dress to fit her. Now she felt more like the old Jasmine who had first come to Glenlacie, and to the watcher who looked at her silently from the shadow of the trees, she looked like a wood nymph.

As she turned her face up to catch the sunbeam shining through the trees, he moved forward and grabbed her, putting his hand across her mouth, then swearing viciously as she bit him.

'Miall!' she screamed. 'Mi-all!'

But there was no answering call as Jasmine felt her

clothes being pulled up and her body exposed. She wriggled like an eel, but she was being pinned down under his weight and she managed to make queer grunting noises as he tried to silence her again.

Suddenly the man was being pulled away from her and an old familiar voice spoke from somewhere that seemed to be miles away and Jasmine's senses reeled.

'What is the meaning of this, Laidlaw? How dare you assault this girl who comes so far to be of service to us?'

He turned back to Jasmine who was painfully getting to her feet, and trying to put her tangled clothes to rights. There was a bruise on her cheek and her legs felt as though they had been torn apart.

'Monsieur André,' she said, in a croaking whisper. 'Oh Monsieur André, I am so glad to see you!'

'Come with me, Mademoiselle Jasmine,' he said, 'And this *canaille* . . . well, we shall see.'

'She's only a gypsy bitch!' the man shouted. 'She should be offering it free!'

André turned. 'For that you will go, now.'

'You canna make me. Ye're no' my employer.'

'We shall see.' André's face had grown dark with anger on his own account. 'We shall see,' he repeated.

Lady Anne's carriage was being cared for in the yard when Jasmine was led to the house by an infuriated André, who lost no time in going to find Lady Anne.

She was in Elliott's room, kneeling by the bed with tears in her eyes.

'That man—the steward, Laidlaw—I request that he be dismissed,' said André imperiously. 'He assaults Mademoiselle Jasmine and insults me.'

'What?' Lady Anne looked round at them, only half-comprehending.

'That man must be dismissed.'

'Oh, don't bother me with such things now,' said Lady Anne, her eyes going to Jasmine who, as before, looked dirty and dishevelled. 'One cannot make a silk purse, can one?' she murmured, her eyes disdainful. 'Calm down, André and we will go into it another time. Now what news did you bring me, Jasmine? Not good, as far as I hear and see. We will go into the study to discuss it.'

'Oh Lady Anne, I am so sorry . . . ' the girl said, a great lump in her throat.

The older woman had quickly conducted them to the study and Jasmine felt that she could have cried hot harsh tears. She was still trembling from the assault and the fierce anger which had gripped her at the touch of the man, and because Miall was too drunk to help her.

If it had not been for André . . . And now, because of it, Lady Anne was looking at her coldly and with suspicion.

'Did you reach Castillon-Cazals?' Lady Anne asked.

'Yes, my lady, but . . . but . . . ' She looked at André. 'Madame la Comtesse had died and Monsieur le Comte and Anne-Marie had taken the coach for Bordeaux. But the horses had bolted near a barricade and the coach overturned. Oh Monsieur André, I'm so sorry, but they are dead. You . . . you have lost all your family.'

André said nothing, but his face had gone very pale and his eyes were full of pain. Lady Anne poured out some wine and held it out to him. She was good and competent in an emergency.

'My poor André,' she said, gently. 'Drink this. It will make you feel better.'

He drank the wine obediently. 'I have always been afraid to have this news, but I did not think . . . All of them . . . ?' His voice broke, but he held himself proudly.

The tears were on Lady Anne's cheeks.

‘Oh André—such tragedy,’ she said. ‘Such hard times and bad news from France these days.’

‘At least it was not the guillotine,’ he said. ‘But I will have to get used to this news. At the moment I feel nothing . . . nothing. Perhaps I had better go to London and join up with the army. Perhaps it is best that I fight.’

‘No, André. There has been enough bloodshed,’ said Lady Anne. ‘You are now the Comte de Castillon-Cazals—’

‘But without property.’

‘It is still there,’ said Jasmine, ‘and there is the steward Jean Gautier, and Madame his wife, though they expected a group of soldiers at any time and we had to leave. Later our verdo was attacked and . . . and Lachie was killed and Master Elliott wounded. We . . . we were rescued by gypsies, and one of them, Alesha, brought the master back to life. We thought him dead many times.’

‘He will need many weeks of nursing,’ said Lady Anne. ‘He has suffered much, and he has lost his bride-to-be, his Anne-Marie.’

Jasmine bit her lip and nodded. She thought about the dark days of their journey, but how could she explain all that had happened to this tall, beautiful lady who looked at her rather disdainfully merely because she was now dirty and dishevelled.

There was silence in the room, each busy with their own thoughts. Suddenly Jasmine felt faint and trembling; she wanted to leave Glenlacie, to get as far away as possible from this place. She hated Miall, but they would be able to understand one another, and he did have some feeling for her. Here there was none.

‘My lady, the master promised me gold, much gold, if I helped him with this mission and we returned safely home to Glenlacie. I . . . I have brought him safely home. Do

you think I could have that reward? I do need the money.'

Lady Anne's eyes went cold. 'I know of no such arrangement,' she said, 'and I do not agree that you have brought him home safely. He is in danger of being a permanent invalid from what I see. The physician does not give us much hope. He recognizes nobody.'

'Oh but he will,' said Jasmine earnestly. 'For a long time it was so, but now he has longer spells when he can speak and when he knows what he is about. Lady Anne, I saved him from the band of armed men who fired on us, and the gypsies helped to heal his wounds.'

'How do we know that it was not the gypsies who gave him these wounds in the first place?' Lady Anne asked. 'He was already carrying valuables, and gold. Where are they?'

'I told you. They burned in the verdo. Everything was burned.'

'Your dancing dress?' asked Lady Anne quickly, and she and André suddenly looked at one another.

'My dancing dress,' Jasmine nodded. 'It was destroyed in the fire.'

'Oh no!' cried Lady Anne. 'The Crystal Heart! Oh André, it should have belonged to you. Oh my dear, it is too much that you should lose everything.'

'It has happened,' he shrugged. 'Yes, it is a great pity that it should have been destroyed, but it is more sad that I lose my father and my mother, and little Anne-Marie. The Crystal Heart is as nothing compared with that.'

His voice choked on a sob and Jasmine found tears on her own cheeks as Lady Anne comforted him. But after a few moment she moved restlessly, thinking about Miall.

'Lady Anne . . . the reward . . .' she said again.

'I tell you, I know nothing of it. I think you were well enough paid, Jasmine, though I shall find you a few coins.'

'There is a gold piece left in the moneybelt,' she said eagerly. 'I did not take it.'

'So you have been through all Elliott's private possessions. One can expect that, I suppose.'

Lady Anne had gone to a desk and was counting out a few pennies, but Jasmine knew it would never be enough to satisfy Miall. He would call her a liar and she would be beaten.

'I can hardly believe that everything has gone,' said Lady Anne in a low voice to André. 'All that work coming to nought. I knew Elliott's plans were doomed to failure when they depended on a gypsy girl to carry them through. He should have listened to me. The Crystal Heart was a diamond with a great history. Somehow one feels that it is all wrong that it should perish in a stupid fire.'

'It is a great loss,' said André. 'Now I am destitute. There is nothing left for me.'

'There will be something, André, when Elliott is better. I had better put these coins in a bag for the girl, or she'll lose them before she leaves the estate. I don't want you back here begging, Jasmine. Do you understand? I don't think you have been very helpful to my brother, and I don't trust you. You have married a gypsy, you say? Here. This will see you through for a few days. You're young and strong and can soon earn your bread.'

'By allowing myself to be raped by your steward,' said Jasmine contemptuously, 'though he is like the rest of your household, wishing to have it for free . . . Here's what I think of your paltry coins—'

She took the bag and scattered it on the floor.

'How dare you!' cried Lady Anne.

'I told you the truth,' blazed Jasmine. 'I did not *want* to ask for reward, but the master promised it to me and I

need it. For someone else. I promised it to someone else. But I would have brought the master home here without asking for a penny reward if I could. I spent many hours protecting him from the cold, the winds, the officers, the soldiers—but not from gypsies. At least *they* were kind to him and took him from the door of Death. You think he is ill now. I tell you, you did not see him when he cried out in fever, then lay so weak and ill that he scarcely breathed. I know these things because I was there. You were not. But do not insult me with pennies, my lady. They are nothing to me.'

She glared at them, her body now held proudly and with dignity. 'And as for the Crystal Heart, Monsieur André—I hear that it is a diamond, and I suspect that it was sewn into my head-dress. Is that so?'

Lady Anne nodded. Her face had grown white and scarlet in turn. She had been about to order Jasmine's removal, but now she paused as Jasmine continued.

'You will find it in the moneybelt amongst the documents in the big pouch which Master Elliott designed. All his papers are there and everything he managed to keep. I only paid the gypsies and the master of the ship which brought us ashore on Master Elliott's instructions. The remaining coin is in his moneybelt along with his papers. I hope you find they are in order. Goodbye Lady Anne. Don't think you will be troubled by me. There is nothing further from my mind.'

'I will see you out,' said André, as Jasmine made for the door. 'I will see you safely to your caravan, though I would like to go and see the Crystal Heart . . . Ah, the Lady Anne goes already . . .'

'She does indeed,' said Jasmine, 'and I do not have a caravan. I only have a mule and cart, and a husband who is probably still drunk.'

'But you have forgotten that you are not safe in the woods,' he protested. 'I will see that the man Laidlaw is routed. Have no fear—he will be punished.'

'It is nothing. I don't care any more,' said Jasmine. 'That part of my life is finished. Now I shall have to go back to earning my living once more.'

'If it is as you say, and the Crystal Heart is still with Monsieur Elliott, then there is hope for me. Lady Anne has gone to look, but I almost fear to look in case it is not so. If it is there, I can sell it and purchase some horses. Perhaps I can start to breed horses and make a new life for myself.'

Jasmine thought about Miall, who also wanted to breed horses but who had no Crystal Heart to help him along.

'I wish you well, Monsieur André,' she said as they came to a halt near where she and Miall had camped. She held out her hand and he took it and kissed her brown fingers.

'Mademoiselle Jasmine, I would be proud if you could be my friend. I have very little money, but here are two gold pieces. Please accept them, for my sake.'

'I asked for what was right and it was denied to me. I cannot take any gifts from you, but I thank you for the offer.'

'I think it would worry me greatly if you refuse. I shall imagine you starving and hungry and I shall not sleep at nights. Also . . .'

He reached into his belt and drew out a wicked-looking dagger with a jewelled hilt.

'If you meet with the steward again, you can protect yourself with this. He will not come near you if you point this blade at him. It is very sharp.'

'I'm afraid of daggers,' said Jasmine, 'just as I was afraid of the guillotine.'

'Ah, the guillotine—she is truly fearful that one. You are not alone in being afraid of her. Take the dagger, Mademoiselle. Hide it on your person, then do not allow any man to hurt you. You are a very beautiful young lady and men will desire you and not always stop to see that you are a lady, not to be taken lightly. Perhaps the dagger will make them think again . . . no?'

'Perhaps,' Jasmine agreed, hiding the dagger in the folds of her dress.

'And the coins. They are given to you with . . . with affection and gratitude. I believe you did your best for Monsieur Elliott. I believe you love him too much to hurt him.'

For a long time they stared at one another and the tears turned Jasmine's eyes into large, bright, twin emeralds.

'It is true,' she whispered. 'I would lay down my life for him. I hope he will be well and happy one day, and find his own happiness.'

André pressed the coins into her hand and kissed her cheek.

'Do not think ill of Lady Anne,' he whispered. 'It is many years since she travelled in France. She does not understand. She thinks she can merely clap her hands and everyone will do her bidding. You understand?'

She nodded. 'You had better go back and rescue your diamond. I have wondered about it many times, because it shone more brightly than the other stones, and Marisa—one of the gypsies—would have taken it but for the fact that it was held so firmly in place. Then Elliott was so restless in his fever until I gave him the head-dress and told the old gypsy woman that he wanted to keep it because of its sentimental value, and that it was his good-luck charm. I felt then that it must be precious to him.'

André laughed ruefully. 'It is a great diamond and

worth thousands of guineas. It would have been terrible had it been lost in the fire. Often I thought it was terrible that it should travel so casually, but I knew that even on Elliott's person it was not safe—if he travelled openly, that is. He was free to come and go to France, but many knew him as our friend and many knew we owned the Crystal Heart. Already France's famous jewels have been confiscated and there are spies everywhere. He could so easily have been robbed, you see.'

Jasmine smiled. 'No one gave it a second glance.'

'Truly, if one wishes to hide a needle, find the haystack. The Crystal Heart hid itself well amongst all those brilliants, and no one saw it when you danced, Mademoiselle Jasmine. Your dancing was more moving than any jewel.'

'You make me feel better. Monsieur André, but now it is back to the world of reality for me. The make-belief is over.'

He leaned over and kissed her again. Suddenly there was an animal-like roaring sound behind them and Miall staggered out of the clearing, brandishing a bottle. He was very drunk and his heavy face, now grown coarse with drink, was flushed and dripping with sweat. There was a dangerous gleam in his dulled black eyes.

'So ye are with other men!' he shouted. 'Flaunting yourself! Bitch! Whore! I shall teach ye to make me a cuckold. I haven't given ye permission to earn our money by lying with men. *I'll* tell ye when I want ye to do that—when I've finished with ye myself! Maybe I should finish with ye now, because ye are worthless!'

André was breathing fire beside her.

'It's all right,' she whispered. 'He's only drunk. He would not say such things if he was sober.'

'He will not say such things *now*.'

'He is my husband. He has his rights. Please go.'

It was slowly coming to Miall that Jasmine might now have been paid, and the rage began to drain from him.

'Did you get the money, Jasmine?' he asked, his voice full of greed. 'Did you get the gold he promised you? We're rich! Show me how rich we are.'

Imploringly she looked at André, asking him to leave, but as she took Miall's arm, he shook free again.

'Where's the gold?'

'They only had a small amount of gold, Miall. The master cannot give it to me because he's sick, and he didn't leave instructions for Lady Anne to pay me.'

She led him away, and André turned back towards the house reluctantly. In the distance, after he had walked towards the clearing near to the stables, he could hear the gypsy's voice raised in anger. For a second he hesitated, wondering if he should go back, then he decided that he could do nothing. But his heart was full of pity for the girl. She did not deserve to be ill-treated by a drunken lout. Why had she married such a man? Surely she had no need to take him in marriage if she had not wanted him.

André sighed and shook his head. How could he ever fathom a woman's heart, even Lady Anne's? She had been unkind to little Jasmine, and he had suspected that she was jealous of her beauty when Elliott first brought her to Glenlacie. Now, even if she did not realize it herself, she was punishing Jasmine for that beauty.

Swiftly he moved indoors and went to find Lady Anne who was in Elliott's room. She was bending over his friend whose lips were moving soundlessly.

'I cannot understand him,' she said to André. 'Can you tell what he is trying to say?'

Elliott stared at André without recognition, then he shut his eyes again.

André stood up, shaking his head. 'He is not well enough to speak.'

'Help me to lift him, André,' said Lady Anne. 'We must find out if that gypsy girl was telling the truth. I find it hard to believe that having found out about the diamond, she would leave it here in the pouch.'

Gently André unstrapped the pouch from Elliott's thin body, soothing the sick man as he moved restlessly and tried to retain a hold on it.

'It is all right, my dear friend,' André said soothingly. 'Your pouch is safe. Lady Anne and André will look after it for you. Rest easy.'

Elliott lay back, his eyes closed once more. Lady Anne opened the pouch and pulled out the head-dress. It was hardly recognizable as the glowing object of beauty which had been made for Jasmine. It was dirty and ragged and the embroidery was beginning to unravel. But from the circle of brilliants in the centre, the Crystal Heart still glowed and sparkled in all its wonderful beauty and splendour.

'It's here!' cried Lady Anne. 'It's still here. Oh André . . .'

'It is here,' he echoed and there were tears in his voice.

Lady Anne was holding the soiled head-dress by her fingertips. 'So like Jasmine!' she said, her lip curling.

'But yes, indeed yes,' André agreed, stroking the magnificent diamond. 'So like Jasmine. It is unbelievable, but it is true. She has brought the Crystal Heart back to me.'

Suddenly Elliott's eyes were open and he was staring at them, this time with recognition.

'Oh Elliott!' Lady Anne cried, kissing his cheek. 'Oh, my dear, I'm so glad to see your eyes open again. Can you hear me? Do you feel better?'

Elliott was looking at the head-dress and his lips moved again soundlessly.

'He is thankful that the Crystal Heart is back in your possession, André,' said Lady Anne. 'His eyes are full of the relief of it. It's all right, my dear, we have it,' she said as Elliott moved again restlessly.

André again bent towards Elliott. He assured him that he knew about his parents and Anne-Marie, but that he must accept what had happened. He had sympathy for Elliott, knowing that he also had suffered a great loss.

'He whispers for Anne-Marie,' said Lady Anne sorrowfully. 'Poor Elliott.'

André said nothing and tried to hide the stab of pain he felt as he bent his head towards Elliott. Because Elliott was whispering for Jasmine.

The sight of only two gold coins soon sobered Miall, and his blood temperature rose to boiling heat.

'Liar! Cheat!' he shouted, and struck Jasmine's face, then pulled at her hair. He threw her to the ground and flung himself on top of her, as vile and gross as the man who had attacked her. For Jasmine there was little difference between them, but she took her punishment from Miall, knowing it had to come. She was too infuriated against Lady Anne to care in any case as she remembered the few mean coins she had counted out so carefully, as though weighing her brother's life against each one. How dare she assess it so cheaply? How dare she assume that the gypsies had caused his injuries instead of ministering to them?

If they had wished him harm, then why should they bring him such a long journey back to Glenlacie? For gold, Lady Anne would say. Yet she had counted out

pennies. Jasmine had wanted to strike her on the face with them. She despised Lady Anne, and it filled her whole mind so that she could tolerate Miall and make allowances for him. He could vent his spleen on her, then it would be over.

But next day it still was not over. Jasmine was continually wrenched from her sleep and prodded into every indignity whilst Miall railed against her for bringing him nothing.

'It is enough,' she said at length. 'You've punished me enough.'

'I'll tell you when it's enough!' he cried. 'I'll decide that for myself!'

'If you touch me again you'll be sorry,' she hissed. 'I tell you, I've had enough! You're my husband, even if it sickens me, but you do not own all of me. Some of me I keep for myself. I am Jasmine, and I will be a slave to no one. If you do not want to accept that, then let me go. I will make my own way.'

'With every man you meet!'

'With none of them! I do *not* sell my body. Never! The master took me because he had bought me, and you took me because I became your wife. But no one else. You will not make me go whoring for you. I am myself; *I* will decide what I do and what I don't do.'

'You bitch!' he cried, coming at her again. 'You dare to talk to me like that? I'll teach you—'

'You'll teach me what?' she asked, holding the small jewelled dagger in her hands. 'If you touch me, I promise you I shall use this. Your punishment of me is over.'

He paused and his bleary eyes narrowed as they looked at the dagger.

'That's worth a great deal of gold,' he said.

She had hardly looked at its worth. Now she saw that he

spoke the truth. But she shook her head.

'It's not for sale,' she said.

'But Jasmine—'

'If it is sold, it will destroy our luck. Already you have destroyed a great deal of it by selling my ivory comb. Look what happened when you parted with it! It broke my ties with the master and he could not get the gold to me. Now we have a second chance, but I shall keep the dagger. If you take it, Miall, as God is my witness, it will destroy you.'

He stared at her fearfully. She seemed to glow with inner fire so that she was beautiful to him again, in spite of her bruised face and body where he had ill-treated her.

A streak of pride began to rise in him, pride that she was his wife. She was like no other gypsy wife. He knew that other gypsies would despise him that he had not yet tamed her, but she was like a wild creature who could not be tamed.

She slipped the dagger out of sight. 'Tomorrow we will go and find your family,' she said, 'and I will become a Birch. But you will not take the dagger.'

Miall did not argue. She was oddly intimidating in this mood.

Jasmine lay down to rest, and for a long time she was sleepless. Part of her lay dead because she had now torn Elliott out of her life, but part of her also seethed with anger towards him. They had waited for several days at Glenlacie and surely, during all that time, he must have had one or two spells of wakefulness when he was in command of himself once more. Why had he not asked for her, and given instructions for the gold to be paid to her? He must know he was leaving her destitute by his neglect. He had allowed her to do everything for him because she loved him, but he cared nothing for her in

return. His thoughts were only for the poor dead girl, Anne-Marie, and what might have been; a gypsy girl was of no account. Giving her her freedom had been enough, according to the master.

Jasmine lay struggling with her devils, then pushed them deep into the dark recesses of her mind. It was over. Finished. Now she had to get on with her life and make of it what she could. If the master had not come along and bought her, she might have married Miall with joy and love, and he might now be a happy man. He would not have revolted her by his drinking, and she would not have known what it was to live a clean fresh life and to enjoy such luxury as she had found at Glenlacie.

Perhaps she could have poured out her passion on Miall. Yet she knew this was not so. Her young heart had been warm for a Miall who did not exist. She had imagined him as a man who walked head and shoulders above everyone else, but she had only been attracted by his youth and strength. She had not seen the narrowness of his mind and the stupidity which he sometimes showed.

She clutched the dagger and vowed that she would always remain true to herself, whatever else she had to do which was against her nature. There would be certain codes beyond which she would not go, and she would force others to respect those codes even if she had to use her dagger. She would no longer steal for anyone, and she would not sell her body. She would work and earn money, and she and Miall would have a good life, but he would never strike her again, or take her when she wanted to be left alone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Next morning Jasmine woke early and prepared a meal for Miall and herself, then she began to repair and clean her dancing dress. It was a poor thing compared with the glittering one Elliott had designed for her, but it did not have to conceal a diamond, she thought wryly. And anyway, it was her dancing that people watched, and her dress became part of her twirling body.

The air was growing balmy with early spring sunshine and the rest at Glenlacie had done Jasmine a great deal of good from the point of view of her general health. She was quick to get over Miall's ill-treatment of her, and she had used her herbal skills to soothe and heal the bruises on her body.

'There must be no more beatings,' she warned Miall, 'if I must dance for you. You will not strike me again.'

'You cannot blame me for being angry,' he said. 'I told you we could not trust a gaujo.'

'It is over now,' she said firmly. 'Look, it is a nice day and the people will come out and warm to the sunshine. Their hearts will be lighter and they will spare us pennies to be entertained. We don't need Glenlacie money. We can earn our own.'

Miall brightened. 'Perhaps you're right, Jasmine.'

'But if it is spent on drink, Miall, then we will have nothing. Ever. It must be saved, but for a few coins you

may have for refreshment. Men are weak and need a drink to give them courage.'

'Men are sorely tried,' growled Miall, flushing.

'The rest will be saved for a good verdo and our own horses. You can breed horses, Miall, and we will sell them at Appleby Fair. The Birches are good horse dealers.'

'The best,' Miall agreed, and there was the dawning of pride in his face. 'My father has owned thirty horses in good years.'

'Well then, let's work towards that end. Come on, Miall. No one is going to trample us in the dust.'

'By God, Jasmine, you're a real woman,' he said with admiration. 'You can take the heart out of a man, but you can put it back, too. We'll do it.'

He caught her to him and kissed her, and she willed herself not to push him away. He was her husband, but she would have to clean him up if she was ever going to accept him, and that she would do little by little. She was beginning to know how to manage Miall, and perhaps to find a little happiness after all.

Jasmine found her greatest happiness in her dancing. It was something which had been born in her, and when she was a child she had watched other gypsy dancers, copying their movements and learning all the old dances which told ancient tales of love, jealousy and hate. But as she learned to perform the dances herself, she found that some deep inner rhythm was emphasizing a movement here and a twist there, so that people paused to watch her with interest. Gradually she perfected such variations so that she became a queen among dancers and even those who knew nothing of the dance could recognize that they were watching someone special.

Their old mule was slow but strong and willing, and the urge to be on the move was not quite so strong in Jasmine

as it was in Miall. He would have ill-treated the animal if she had not stopped him, and it was she who urged that the creature's back be rubbed with wild garlic during inclement weather in order to keep out animal disorders. She also saw that it was well fed and watered. Miall thought it a poor thing after the horses he had helped his father to rear, but it was all they had, and when his temper cooled, he began to take an interest in the beast and to care for it.

'We'll buy you a foal to rear,' said Jasmine, as they counted out some money after she had danced at one of the villages through which they had just passed. Soon they would arrive at Dumfries where they could stay for a few days and where Jasmine hoped to raise a good deal more money. It was there, however, that her new resolutions were put to the test because Miall stole what they had earned up until then; again he spent it on drink, and would have come home and beaten her if she had not drawn the dagger on him.

'I told you I would never allow you to lay a finger on me again,' she said, her eyes glittering with anger and frustration that she could not control him. His character was too weak. He was even worse than Judd, she thought angrily.

'You're a witch,' he said drunkenly. 'You'll turn into an old witch and nobody will want you.'

She drew back as though he had struck her. It was one of her nightmares that she would be alone one day and that no one would love her. Miall had hit her most vulnerable spot.

'I'm not a witch,' she whispered, 'but I am angry, Miall. You've spent all our money on drink again. You're a drunkard.'

'I am,' he agreed. 'I'm a drunkard!' He tittered tipsily.

‘And my wife tries to tell me what to do!’

‘Devil take you!’ she cried. ‘Do what you like.’ The tears were not far away.

Next day Miall was repentant and grovelled to her so that she had no respect for him, but he was ashamed of spending the money which might have gone towards buying a foal.

‘Never mind,’ said Jasmine wearily. ‘The sun is in the sky and I can dance again.’

So she danced and the crowds gathered to watch and Miall collected enough coins to gladden his heart again. Jasmine was right. If they saved the money they would soon have their own verdo and horses. They would be rich, if only he could keep off the drink. Morosely he looked into his own soul and did not like the weakness he saw there, but he made excuses for it. He could not criticize himself. It was Jasmine who had made him that way, even if she could also drag him from the depths to the heights.

They travelled to Carlisle, where they watched a public hanging. Jasmine felt as though the shadow of the guillotine lay over her again, and the crowds for the hanging were also her audience when she danced for them, and the hanged man was somehow responsible for enriching their small hoard of cash.

But although Jasmine vaguely recognized this fact, she knew she was becoming harder and it did not trouble her as it might have done.

Miall had kept off the drink, encouraged by the money they were making into believing they might take the first step towards the future Jasmine had painted, and it was in Carlisle that they met other gypsies who had a foal for sale which pleased Miall even as it disappointed him. It was poor stock. But what could he expect for the money they

could afford? And it was a start.

Fortunately, the other gypsy was not a drinker and they spent the evening gathering news. There was no word of Judd and Rima, but the Birches had last been seen on the Hexham road. This settled an argument between Jasmine and Miall, and pleased him because he had won. She had wanted to move south to Penrith, then westwards towards the wild parts of Cumberland which she loved, whilst he was tugged towards the vast rolling hills of Northumberland. His heart lay across the Pennines, in the stretches of empty moorland and straight tracks which had been laid by Roman armies so many years before. Miall normally had little imagination, but the wall which the Roman soldiers had built was intriguing to him and he found many spots to shelter him whilst he thought about the long dead men who had laid one stone on top of another.

'I wonder what it would have been like to live in those days,' he mused to Jasmine, 'and to be a Roman soldier.'

'You wouldn't have liked it,' she assured him. 'You might have been punished by your commander for very small offences.'

'But I might have *been* the commander,' Miall protested, and she laughed with such genuine mirth that he could not help laughing with her.

That night they made love together and Jasmine was happier than she had been for many a day.

'My mother will be expecting your belly to swell,' said Miall, as he held her close.

'How can I dance if I am heavy with child?' she asked. 'Will your mother feed and clothe us too?'

'We could do other things until the child is born. I don't know why you do not breed.'

'Perhaps the fault is not with me,' she reminded him

and he grew angry.

'It is not with me,' he told her firmly, and she believed him.

'There is time,' she said. 'Women are like plants and trees. Some breed every year and come to flower like the rose, but for others it is every two years and for some it can be seven. Perhaps I breed every two years, but it might be seven, Miall. I am well and strong and I am sure that I am not barren. My body rhythms are normal and I developed as a normal woman.'

'You were made to bear children,' he agreed.

'Well, don't worry about it. Have a little patience. Didn't I promise you a foal? And now you have one.'

'I shall expect a better child than the foal you found for me. It is a miserable runt.'

'That's where your skill comes in,' said Jasmine. 'You will build the foal into a fine creature and it will earn you a lot of money. That's where you have to be clever.'

'I can try,' said Miall, 'but this is where you are not at all clever, wife. You can give your orders over what we are doing, what we will eat, where we will stop for you to dance, but you cannot tell me I have a fine horse when I know I have not.'

'*Touché*,' she said.

'What? What sort of language is that?'

'You should know, since you were in France, too.'

'You speak it like a native.'

'I have an ear for such things.'

'Well, speak like a gypsy before we meet my mother and sister again or they will be against you and think you are aping the gaujos.'

She flushed. She hated going back to the rough, uncouth tongue, but Miall spoke sense. If she were to become a gypsy again, she must sound like one.

They were pierced by the last lingering stabs of winter as they travelled over the Pennines after resting at Brampton, and a flurry of snow had Jasmine huddled cold and miserable in their cart under an ancient and rather smelly rug. Her blood grew feverish and she was dreaming again, but this time her dreams of the overturned coach and the dead faces were mixed up with the fire and her own efforts to pull Elliott to safety. She cried out to him and tried to save him, and found Miall shaking her furiously.

'You have been calling for that . . . that gaujo—*fine* gentleman that he is!—who let us down,' he snarled at her. 'You say you forget him, but he comes back to haunt your dreams. He is still lurking in your heart.'

'I dreamed of the fire where I almost lost my life,' she protested. 'Don't you dream of bad times? I could have been killed in that fire. Is it so unusual to call to the master to save me?'

'You had to save *him*,' Miall reminded her, and his lips curled in anger. 'If you call out like that again after we join my family, my mother and sister will wonder—'

'I'm sick of hearing about your mother and sister!' she said, suddenly angry. She still felt hot and feverish, but now and again the cold sent shivers down her spine.

'They are my people.'

'And I'm your wife. Does your father go snivelling off to live with *his* people, or does he support your mother? Are you a man or a little boy? When we meet the Birches, I will fit in and do my share, but I will not be browbeaten by your mother or sister. I am myself.'

But it was a foretaste of what was to come, and Jasmine began to realize that her life might not be as free and easy as it had been with Judd and Rima. She would be expected to become a true Birch, and that would not be easy.

But winter was over, her hold on spring wrenched from her by warm days which now brought the primroses and violets into full bloom. As they travelled towards Hexham, Jasmine was able to gather some of her precious herbs among the new young shoots. Drinking the refreshing tonics offered to her by the bounty of Nature, she began to feel well and strong again, and her skin grew brown as a berry.

Miall had brought her a comb in Carlisle, as a peace-offering for stealing her ivory comb and for spending the money she had earned by her dancing, and each morning she combed out her tangled curls and kept her hair clean, so that it swept in great rippling waves down her back. Sometimes she bound it up to be more in keeping with a style suited to a married woman, but it looked better worn loose when she danced and helped to take away the tawdry looks of her dress.

The Birches, they had discovered, had moved from Hexham and were travelling south into Yorkshire.

'We will find them,' said Miall, 'one of these days.'

'Surely they will return to Appleby for the Fair,' said Jasmine. 'We might not find them until we return there.'

'We will find them,' Miall repeated. 'I know where they're going. We will find them in Richmond.'

Jasmine said no more. She was in no hurry to join up with her in-laws, and she insisted on stopping to buy more material for a new dancing dress in Hexham.

'It earns us the money,' she told Miall.

Since he had let her down, she had divided the money and hidden part of it in a secret place. Even if he grew weak or angry with her so that he wanted to rush to the nearest ale-house, he would not spend their last penny, and she spared a few coins for embroidery threads. Some day she would make a new dancing dress like the one she

had worn for Elliott. That much she promised herself before her body grew thick and less supple and she had to give up dancing.

But Miall was eager to see his family again and they cut across country to Richmond where they found that the Birches had recently left and might be moving towards Thirsk.

Without waiting more than a day to earn their money, Miall insisted that they travel with all speed, and on a wooded hillside, they came upon the big encampment one warm evening, and Miall was once again greeting his own people.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There had been changes wrought amongst the Birches since that day, many weeks ago, when Miall had walked out in order to go and claim his bride. His father had suffered a stroke and was now almost helpless and had to be looked after as they travelled the countryside. His mother had grown old and sour with trying to nurse the old man, and Miall's brother, Nevin, had had to shoulder heavy responsibilities which should have fallen to Miall if Jasmine had not tempted him away.

Old Nan Birch, his mother, was torn between pride that Miall had done what he set out to do and had taken his bride from the gaujo gentleman, and anger that he should be put to such trouble in the first place. She could not understand what Miall saw in such a poor thin female who did not look as though she had a drop of gypsy blood in her veins. There had been rumours about the Legh's daughter, and now she looked closely at Jasmine and suspected that they were all true. This was no true Romany. This was poor stock and might even be pure gaujo. However, she was so pleased to have Miall returned to her that she welcomed Jasmine as her daughter.

But the same could not be said for Lanny, his sister, who loved and spoiled her brother. Lanny was un-

attractive with lank greasy black hair and a complexion which had never been soft since a few days after she was born. She had now married and her man was travelling with the Birches. He was a small weasly man called Jake Reid who was more tinker than gypsy and he was a thief. He had pale watery blue eyes which followed Jasmine lasciviously so that Lanny could not help but notice, and for which she blamed Jasmine.

She and Lanny would never have much love for one another, thought Jasmine, but she shrugged off the thought. She was strong enough to hold her own with any woman or man. She always carried her jewelled dagger close to her person. It was her dearest possession, though she would have denied it vehemently if anyone had suggested that it was because the dagger was her last link with Glenlacie. She had forgotten Glenlacie—until she fell asleep and began to dream. Often she would wake up with tears on her cheeks and her heart full of pain, which grew into a slow dull ache when she realized that she was part of the Birch's encampment, and that their way of life was hers.

Nevin Birch immediately insisted that Miall take his share of looking after the horses and old Joe, their father, and Jasmine had to help with the nursing of the old man. He was completely incontinent and they had to gather fresh straw to put under his wasted and withered body, and burn the old straw which he had soiled heavily.

The smell seemed to cling to Jasmine's hands and she washed them so frequently that Lanny came to taunt her.

'Would you like rose petals in your water, my lady?' she asked. 'And perhaps a silver bowl for the scented water?' Her tone changed. 'You'd better forget those lily-white hands, Lady Sniff, and get down to some work. Nevin's wife is near her time and I can't do it all. Not but what I've

been expected to, while you roamed the Continent having yourself a fine holiday.'

'You wouldn't say that if you'd been where we've been,' Jasmine flashed. 'If you think we went to France for a holiday, you must be out of your mind.'

'You don't know what work is, with your little bit of dancing.' Lanny tripped around clumsily, holding her skirt in mockery of Jasmine.

'How charming,' said Jasmine, her eyes gleaming. 'Perhaps you'd like to wear my dress, Lanny, and take your turn entertaining. Or is it easier just to sit back and live on what your man has stolen?'

'Ow . . . you!' cried Lanny, enraged, and dug her fingers into Jasmine's hair.

'Here! That will do,' cried Nan, suddenly strong in her anger so that Lanny's hands dropped to her side. 'I will not have fighting among the women. Men can fight like men, but women are like cats. Cats can kill one another. Jasmine will dance when she is called upon to do so, and in camp she can help with the labour. She will do her share, never fear, Lanny.'

'I'll do my share of everything,' said Jasmine boldly, 'but Lanny can do her share, too, and I think she ought to take her turn in changing the straw for the father. If we're going to be fair, then that is fair, isn't it?'

Nan debated for a while. 'You and Miall do it for a month to make up for the time you were away, then Lanny will take her turn. That's fair.'

With that Jasmine had to be content, though for several days she was sick behind the bushes and old Nan Birch looked on with approval, thinking she was breeding. She encouraged Miall to rejoice, but he said nothing, knowing that Jasmine was still barren.

It was Lanny who found out her secret and who caused

the biggest row in which Jasmine had ever been involved in her life.

Jasmine and Miall had managed to buy another verdo which was even older and more decrepit than the one which Elliott had purchased. They had been travelling through Darlington and had camped near another gypsy family who had one to spare. Jasmine added part of her secret hoard to the money Miall had counted out and the deal was completed with much merry-making on a warm spring evening, round a glowing fire, and a cookpot full of hare stew.

Jasmine felt replete and her spirits rose again. It was on nights like these that she was glad to be Romany, when the day's angers and jealousies were forgotten and only the sense of well-being remained. Even Lanny's face in the glowing firelight looked oddly beautiful instead of sulky and coarse-complexioned. Jasmine did not know that her own face was so beautiful that all the men were looking at her silently and thinking greedy thoughts. She only saw Jake Reid's mean eyes fixed on her and she shivered in spite of the heat. She had grown to hate the man.

Lanny had noticed the looks which her husband cast in Jasmine's direction and her mouth grew ugly, though she said nothing but brooded silently and watched Jake from the shadows as the work of the encampment went on.

Nevin and Miall were looking after old Joe's horses and deciding which animals had to be sold at Appleby Fair. Nevin's wife, Sarah, had grown great with her first child, and old Nan was soft with her and saw to it that Jasmine and Lanny shouldered most of the work.

Between times Jasmine cleaned the vermin out of her

verdo and sewed a few drapes to make it more attractive. She was humming to herself as she sewed, a few days later, having finished her duties in helping to clean up the old man, a task she was now able to do with ease because it had become so routine. Miall and Nevin had gone into a nearby village to buy meal and flour. They expected to reach Barnard Castle the following day, when Jasmine would attract the crowds by dancing and this time Lanny would play the tambourine for her.

‘You will collect the money,’ Jasmine said to Miall.

‘You can trust my sister.’

‘Perhaps, but I don’t trust Jake. He would thief from us if he could.’

‘You may be right about that,’ Miall agreed. ‘Lanny could have done better for herself than to marry Jake Reid. He’s worth watching.’

That had been the previous day. Now Jasmine looked up from her sewing to find that the caravan door had darkened as Jake walked in and closed it behind him.

‘What do you want?’ she asked, as calmly as she could manage. He was leering at her knowingly. ‘Has Lanny sent you for something?’

‘Lanny’s busy. The old woman wants her.’

‘What for?’

‘The de’il kens, unless she needs her toenails clipping. Now there’s a task for a fine lady! Maybe they’ll save it for you.’

Jasmine’s lip curled and she picked up her sewing again. ‘If it’s Miall you want to see, then you had better wait for him to return . . . outside! I can’t imagine that we could entertain one another.’

‘Oh but can we not, Jasmine?’ he asked, very softly. ‘I can’t think of anybody who could entertain me better. Give me a kiss.’

Before she could stop him he had grabbed her with sinewy arms as hard as steel and was covering her mouth with his own. She could feel his rabbit teeth against her own and she struggled away in revulsion, beating at him as she managed to pull a hand free.

'Keep away from me!' she cried.

'Aw come on, Jasmine,' he mumbled, his face now scarlet as he struggled to hold her. 'Ye know fine that I want ye. What's Miall ever done for ye? He doesn't know how to treat a woman. Ye won't have heard any complaints from *Lanny*.' He leered at her knowingly.

She backed away from him but he grabbed her again and forced her down onto the seat which made into a bed, and began to pull at her clothes, preparing himself to take her, though she gathered strength upon strength in her revulsion.

'Twisting her body, she managed to reach under her bodice for the jewelled dagger which she always carried, concealed in her most secret place.

'Get away!' she screamed. 'Or I'll maim you for life and you'll never try to insult another woman!'

His bleary eyes caught a glint of the dagger and he paused in his exertions. She rolled away from him and stood up.

'Get out,' she said harshly. 'Make yourself decent and go. If you think that I'd ever want you, you must be mad.'

'By God—you bitch!' he cried as he rose to his feet and lunged towards her, trying to reach the dagger. 'I'm not good enough for such a fine lady! By God, I'll show you!'

She had thrown open the door and suddenly the caravan seemed to be full of people as Lanny rushed towards them followed by Miall and Nevin.

'What's going on?' asked Lanny, her dark face suspicious but her eyes suddenly knowing when she caught

sight of Jake's flushed face and slack mouth.

Jasmine said nothing, though she still held the dagger in front of her, and Lanny's eyes were immediately drawn to it.

'You've been threatening Jake's life,' she cried. 'He plays a joke on you and you threaten his life!'

'A joke!' cried Jasmine.

'What joke?'

Miall had bounded into the verdo and was looking from one to the other in a bewildered fashion.

'He will keep away from me,' said Jasmine tightly. 'I don't care for his jokes. I won't be mauled by Jake Reid.'

'She asks for it,' shouted Lanny, 'flaunting herself in her scarlet clothes and showing off her body! She asks for anything she gets!'

'I don't ask for anything except reward for my dancing,' said Jasmine. 'Just see that he doesn't come near me again.'

She was nearly sick with loathing and she wanted to wash her mouth with clear water and a cooling drink where he had kissed her.

'She's got a dagger,' said Lanny. 'Take it from her, Miall, before she goes crazy and kills the lot of us.'

His eyes were on the jewelled dagger and Miall ordered Jasmine to put it away.

'I don't take it from her,' he told Lanny. 'It's our luck.'

'Your *luck*! What luck? What luck has she brought you? This poor verdo? She dances to enjoy herself and to attract men, and she keeps the money. And she denies you children!'

Jasmine had scarcely listened to Lanny's spite. She had heard it so often. But now the colour mounted her cheeks at the last remark.

'How does she deny me children?' asked Miall. 'She

does not repulse me, even if she *would* strike your man dead if he came near her.'

Miall was torn between rage at Jake Reid for daring to take such a liberty with his wife, and admiration that Jasmine had fought him off so well. She was no trollop and would have truck with no man save himself; Miall preened himself in that knowledge.

'She takes herbs which kill your seed,' said Lanny triumphantly. 'I have seen her. She drinks the witch's brew every morning. She is not with child and will not breed for you, Miall. I know her, and I know that she will be the death of you some day if you don't watch out. She thinks only of herself.'

'I drink herbs to purify the blood,' Jasmine protested, but for once she could not hold herself upright and tell the truth with her usual ringing clarity. So Lanny had spied on her! Lanny had known what she was about!

Miall's eyes were turned on her, faintly suspicious at first, then with growing knowledge that Lanny could be right.

'Get out!' he hissed to his sister and Jake Reid. Nevin had already left the verdo, being unconcerned in a family row of this kind. He did not blame Jake for trying to take Miall's wife, but Miall was within his rights in trying to break the weasel's jaw.

Now Jake was glad to go, and Lanny smiled maliciously at Jasmine when she saw the anger blazing in Miall's eyes. The lady dancer would have to keep her skirts to the floor after Miall had finished with her!

Soon the door was shut and they were left alone. Jasmine grew afraid. She knew she had wronged Miall, and she could not threaten him if she did not have right on her side.

'I have to keep healthy, Miall,' she defended herself. 'I

have to keep the sweats out of my body and my bones from turning brittle. I only take the herbs which Rima taught me to brew, and I was not ready for childbearing when I lived with Rima.'

'Then if you are healthy, why are you not with child?' he cried. 'Nevin's son will soon be born and I want my son to have his share of what is due to me. I want my child to grow up with Nevin's and learn how to breed horses and carry on my name. You admired Glenlacie, but our own name is just as old and you should be proud to bear it, as I am. We are a proud race and you should be proud to be married to a gypsy named Birch.'

'It is an ancient name,' she agreed.

'If you destroy my seed—'

'How do I know that I have not been witched?' she asked hurriedly, seeing him reach for his whip. She resented having to take a beating, though deep in her heart she knew she deserved it. But it meant that her movements in the dance would be agony to her, and pride would make her cover her body with her dancing dress so that none might see the weals, then her style and tempo would be pale shadows of their usual glory.

'Who would witch you?'

'Lanny,' she cried, her eyes sly. She had no compunction in blaming her sister-in-law. Lanny had spied on her and Jasmine was deeply angered.

Miall paused. 'Lanny? My sister? Why should my sister want to make you barren?'

'She's jealous. If you don't have a child and she does, then her child will have everything which should belong to yours. Besides, she loves you. She's jealous.'

Miall thought this over, then his lip curled again.

'You are lying, Jasmine! You are barren . . . you were barren long before we returned to my family. There was

no one to witch you then. And I know when you are telling lies. You cannot stand before me in all your pride.'

He had laid aside his whip, but now he slapped her cheek, then slapped it again so that she reeled from him, but did not reach for her dagger. He had a right to punish her.

He looked towards the box where she kept the herbal mixtures which she brewed whilst they were travelling the country, and picked them up, throwing open the door of the verdo once more. When Jasmine saw what he was about, she screamed in protest. It had taken her months to prepare her medicines.

'No, Miall! No!' she shouted, but he pushed her aside, and began to pour out every bottle. 'We will need those,' she cried. 'They are harmless. That one cools fever if there is a wound. Leave them, Miall.'

But he was too incensed to listen and after a while she lay sprawled on the couch and sobbed quietly whilst he poured out the last of them. The bruise on her cheek was beginning to swell, and she had nothing to put on it to ease the discolouration, but Miall looked at it with satisfaction. His family would expect him to beat his wife for the crime of which Lanny had accused her, and they would have shown him no respect if he had not touched her.

When the last of the herbs had been drained, Miall turned back to Jasmine and began to strip off his clothing, motioning her to do the same.

'Now you can't poison what I give you,' he told her. 'Now we'll see some changes. You cannot deny me what is rightfully mine.'

Long after he had fallen asleep, Jasmine lay awake and thought about the secret place which contained her small hoard of coins and the bottle which Miall had not been able to find. The herbs which he had destroyed were

harmless, and Miall himself might feel their loss of them before she found herself in need of their soothing palliative treatment. She had bewailed their destruction loudly, knowing that if she did so Miall would look no further.

Yet she was still guilty of murdering his children, she thought with an inward shudder. She still deserved punishment. But she would not bear children for the Birches. She would go barren before her flesh and blood mingled with theirs.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As the weather warmed they began to travel towards Appleby once more and came in contact with several gypsy families who had moved south out of Scotland. They brought tales of unrest in Edinburgh because of Thomas Muir, who was accused of being a revolutionary and not a reformer. He had agitated for reforms in Parliament and was demanding the right to vote for more people in Scotland, and for members of Parliament to be elected more often.

But news of the terrible happenings in France were now reaching the ordinary citizens and fear grew amongst the people that the revolution would spread to Scotland. There was rioting in the city, and Thomas Muir had been arrested and was being brought to trial.

The news meant little to the Birches, but Jasmine listened avidly. She remembered how she had accompanied Elliott to deliver the gold he had carried to France for Thomas Muir. Did this mean that Elliott would be arrested, too? Yet other people had also sent help to the ordinary French people at that time. They could not all be arrested.

The news of the riots had brought the journey through France back to her mind very vividly, and for a day or two she was silent and preoccupied as her thoughts winged

back to Elliott at Glenlacie. She had been angry and had felt betrayed, and she still felt that he had not honoured his promises, but she would dearly have loved to have news of him, and to know whether or not he was recovering from his wounds now that the rigours of his journey were over. With good food and careful nursing, he was no doubt once again on his feet and administering his estate.

But without Anne-Marie. Perhaps he would not choose another wife. Perhaps Lady Anne would choose someone for him, one of his own kind . . .

Lanny was pregnant. She flaunted her news in front of the family and fawned over a sniggering Jake so that Jasmine's toes curled with distaste.

Miall took the news with vexation and a return to his disappointment with Jasmine. She was once again on her courses and he thought that Lanny had been wrong to accuse her of killing his seed. He had poured away her medicines and she no longer took her tonics, but it had made no difference to her fertility. She was still barren. She still protested that there was plenty of time for them to get children, but now he saw Nevin's wife about to bear his child, and his sister Lanny also proving herself fruitful, and Miall wanted to beat and shake Jasmine into conception.

Jake decided that they should celebrate and they bought bottles of cheap wine and ale at a nearby inn, and Jasmine was set to bake her special bread and to cook a game stew full of rich spices.

'I have no herbs for the stew,' she said pointedly. 'It will not be rich in flavour. And if any of you have an inner disturbance, there is no medicine now to ease the pain and help the flux, so take care what you eat and drink.'

'We will not be poisoned any more,' said Lanny, leering

at her, 'nor am I likely to miscarry my child.'

'You will only do that if you misuse your own body,' said Jasmine smoothly. 'I have seen you leaping onto the horses and riding them without a saddle. That is like to lose you your child. A drink made from raspberry leaves is more like to help the birth.'

'That won't be tomorrow,' said Lanny. 'Tonight we'll eat and drink well, and we'll see Nan Birch a grandmother twice over before the year is out.' She looked meaningfully at Jasmine who took no notice. 'Do you still believe in your luck?' she demanded.

'Why not? I'm younger than you. I will have a better caravan for my children than the old rotten thing we have at the moment. I want Miall to be a man who is respected for his property and not kept poor by trying to feed a brood of children. We will wait until God sends us a son and he might prove a better man than ten of anyone else's.'

'So says my lady again,' sneered Lanny. 'Instead of sewing for a child, it is always the fancy costume and the brightness of baubles for you. Some day you will dance too well and break your ankle.'

'Stop your noise,' said old Nan as she came to stoke the fire. 'Draw the old man's straw bed near the fire. He lies like a stuffed doll, but his eyes move and he can maybe share in the celebrations. Sarah will lie down. She is already sickly with the weight of her burden.'

Jasmine accepted one cup of wine and found it harsh and sour. The stew, mopped up with bread, was as rich as she could make it, but the wine would have made her sick if she had not put it aside.

She watched the men swallowing theirs in greedy gulps as the laughter grew louder and the conversation became more and more ribald. Her ears burned as she heard

intimate details of her married life being discussed by Miall, and the shrill laughter of the women as they listened avidly.

Old Nan grew maudlin and cooed over the poor old man who lay imprisoned in his own body, and she held a cup to his lips to make him drink. Jasmine thought about the task of changing his straw which lay ahead, and she would have liked to knock away the cup, but did not dare. Lanny, too, grew more and more drunk and leaned against Jake, pawing him so that Jasmine wanted to slip away but could not move an inch. Miall had put his arms round her and had promised that it would be her turn next.

Suddenly there was a loud scream, and Nevin looked towards his caravan stupidly.

‘That’s Sarah,’ said Jasmine.

‘She’s angry because she is not celebrating,’ said Nevin drunkenly.

‘Let me go,’ cried Jasmine, turning on Miall. ‘It’s her time. Come on, Lanny—come and help.’

‘She can’t help,’ said Miall. ‘She’s asleep. We’re all asleep.’

Jasmine looked round as they began to loll about drunkenly. The wine was so strong and harsh that it was very intoxicating, and the Birches were far from abstemious. She and Lanny had been ordered to help Sarah with the birth since old Nan was now very bent with rheumatism. Nan had delivered many children in the past and had often helped at births when they joined an encampment of several families and some woman’s time had started.

Now Jasmine pulled her skirts free of Miall’s clutching fingers and ran towards Nevin’s caravan as Sarah screamed again.

It was fortunate that they had a good verdo, thought Jasmine. In the gypsy world, the Birches were relatively prosperous and she was glad that there was shelter for the suffering girl, instead of a raggedy tent, as she began to soothe Sarah down. Nevin's wife was not like the usual gypsy. She had straw-coloured hair and a colourless face, and Jasmine had heard rumours, quickly suppressed, that Nevin had met her while travelling through Lancashire, when he had gone to the docks to look at the sailing ships bound for the North American continent. Sarah, it was rumoured, had been one of a destitute Irish family, thrown out by a careless landlord and forced to go in search of work. Nevin had seen her waiting at the side of the docks and had taken a fancy for her. She was already quiet, cowed and too ignorant to care what happened to her. Nevin had brought her back to camp and relieved her half-starved parents of the burden of looking after her.

Now she roared with pain and terror as her body became a struggling mountain of flesh, trying to throw out the living creature which had taken up habitation nine months before.

'Stop making such a noise,' Jasmine gasped.

She had never delivered a child before, but she knew about labour pains and she tried to help Sarah to ride the storm of each one as they succeeded one another.

She would have given much for her cooling herbs, especially those which would cleanse Sarah's body. The girl was too weak or too indolent to keep herself clean and Jasmine ran back to her own caravan for fresh linen when she saw why Sarah was having a struggle to bear her child.

'Come on, Lanny!' she called, trying to rouse her sister-in-law. 'You must help—for God's sake! Sarah's child comes feet first and I cannot manage by myself. Miall! Mi-all and Nevin!' She roared their names and shook

them vigorously. 'You must go to the village and ask for a midwife.'

They lay in a drunken stupor and she pushed Lanny once more.

'Go away,' muttered Lanny. 'Leave me alone.'

Jasmine had collected the linen she required, then she picked up a bowl still filled with water she had used earlier for washing herself. There was another bucket of water and this she put on the fire which was still hot, her flesh chilled as the suffering girl screamed again.

Jasmine kicked out wildly at Nevin, then at Miall, to see if they could go for help, but they were still helplessly drunk, so she picked up the used water and poured it over Lanny who began to thrash about wildly as though she had been drowned.

'Wake up,' cried Jasmine. 'Help me with Sarah.'

'Bitch!' shouted Lanny. 'You bitch! You've soaked me! Bitch . . .'

Her voice was trailing off again drunkenly, but the water had chilled her clothing and she rose to her feet in an ugly mood. She would have launched herself at Jasmine, but the girl was already running from her.

'Help me,' Jasmine called again. 'Get yourself sober and help me, if you can't go to the village. It is already too late.'

Sarah Birch writhed and groaned in agony, screaming like an animal as each pain overtook her. As the child began to be born, Jasmine grabbed it with cleaned hands. After an eternity of manoeuvring, she managed to pull the infant free of its mother, then tried to stench the flow of blood which burst forth from the struggling girl. The cord had to be cut, she knew, so she washed her dagger and used that, then wrapped the howling child in her fresh linen and set about trying to keep the life's blood in the

girl who now lay shuddering on the bed, her lips blue and her face greyish-white.

Lanny struggled through the doorway, peering at her blearily.

'Take the child,' ordered Jasmine. 'Wash it, then help me with Sarah. I need to stop the bleeding.'

'Eh . . . what?' Lanny asked and turned round to be sick.

Jasmine worked like one demented, but after a long time she turned a stricken face to Lanny.

'It's no use. She's dead,' she said, and fell to her knees as her body began to tremble with shock. 'I might have saved her with my medicines, but even those had to be thrown away. Do you hear me, Lanny Reid? You drunken lot! You were all too drunk to help me and now Sarah is dead. None of you could go for help.'

Lanny's face was almost as white as Sarah's as she stared at the still form, then looked on whilst Jasmine picked up the crying boy and began to wash the mucus from his face.

'Sober up Nevin,' Jasmine told Lanny. 'I could not when I needed him. He'll have to report Sarah's death, and see to her burial. Tell him . . . tell him he has a son.'

'How could she have died?' asked Lanny stupidly. 'What did you do to her?'

Jasmine did not reply.

'You killed her!' cried Lanny. 'You were jealous of her for bearing a child. You won't come near *me* when I bear my child.'

'Oh shut up!' cried Jasmine and slapped Lanny's face hard. 'Look at the blood. *Look* at it! Can't you see what killed her? The child came feet first and you were too drunk to help me.'

'Don't blame me!' shouted Lanny and ran from the

verdo to wake up the rest of the family. 'She won't come near me,' she was howling. 'She won't use her dagger on me!'

It was only later that Jasmine saw her dagger had gone, and her anger against Lanny went very deep.

She had to explain to Miall and Nevin just what had happened, and although they began to look on her half-fearfully when Lanny screamed her accusations, old Nan for once took her side.

'We were drunk,' Nan said, 'and Jasmine saved the child. I've heard of children being born like that before, and Sarah was a gaujo, not a gypsy. Gaujos don't bear children as easily as gypsies. I've looked at the blood and I believe it is as Jasmine says. We should have been ready to help her or go for a midwife.'

'I will look after the child,' Jasmine offered.

It was not her own child, yet she thought it might satisfy Miall for a while so that his mood would lighten and he would not look at her suspiciously. She could look after the infant until Nevin could care for the child again.

'No, I'll take the child,' cried Lanny.

'You'll have enough to do with your own child,' said Nan. 'Give it to Jasmine.'

'Let Nevin decide, when he has done all he has to do,' Miall said. 'The child belongs to him.'

Nevin gave the child to Lanny, and Jasmine told Miall that she wanted him to retrieve her dagger.

'It is our luck,' she said, 'and it saved the child's life; he might have perished with the mother. Get it back for me, Miall, or the luck will be turned against us.'

'Give me time,' he said sourly.

Miall was tired of listening to her rantings over the dagger, and they were all shocked, in their own way, at the death of the Irish girl. Nevin went on a drunken orgy

which kept him stupefied for several days and Lanny began to show fear because she knew she would have to face a similar ordeal one day.

She had insisted on taking Nevin's child just to oppose Jasmine, and sometimes she could have wished that she had not been so hasty, and would push the crying baby into Jasmine's arms. Then she would remember that Nevin had chosen her to mother his child, and would go and drag him back again.

Most often old Nan was given the baby to nurse and the shock of losing the young mother began to fade into the past. Nevin had called the child Joe to please his father and felt that there was a flicker of interest in the faded eyes of the old man as he held up his son for him to admire.

'He'll be a fine horse dealer,' he said proudly. 'Won't he, Da?'

Miall looked on jealously and turned back to Jasmine.

'You must get my dagger back,' she insisted, 'before Jake Reid sells it. Don't forget it's worth a great deal of money. It's jewelled and it represents our fortune.'

This time she struck the right note. Miall was beginning to form a hearty loathing for his brother-in-law who often found clever, sneaking ways to needle him.

'I'll get it back,' he swore. 'See if I don't.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

By June they had once again travelled to Appleby, and Jasmine found herself eagerly anticipating each day once again. She had forgotten that she had hated Judd and Rima for accepting gold coins for her, and she could only remember the long happier days of her childhood when she was looked after and loved as their daughter. At least, Rima had loved her, even if Judd had only been interested in exploiting her.

For a week or two Jasmine had been left alone without too much interference from the Birches. Miall and Nevin had a lot of work to do with the horses and Lanny was now looking after baby Joe. Apart from helping to nurse old Joe, Jasmine spent some time in finishing the embroidery on her dancing dress so that it would look attractive for the Fair, and making one or two simple gowns such as had been made for her at Glenlacie. She was now quite proficient with her needle, and the dresses were very becoming.

The summer weather was proving more disappointing than on the previous year. Constant rain had made a quagmire of the gypsy site on the hill overlooking Appleby, but a sudden clearing of the rain brought the sun out again, and the horses were plunged into the river and brushed clean and shining so that the dealing could begin.

Once again the crowds began to gather and there was a great colourful mixture of noise and laughter, quarrels and disputes, music and drunkenness, loves, hates, jealousies, and the parading of affluence in front of abject poverty. The Appleby Fair was a week of celebration for the gypsies when families and friends could gather together once more.

Jasmine danced and allowed Lanny to collect the money even though she knew she was being cheated of her fair share. Her mind had gone back to the previous year and she had returned to look at the Crown Inn, to live again the time she had spent there with Elliott. She almost felt she could see his tall figure and striding walk, and especially she could imagine Lachie, with his quiet eyes and gentle laughter, so that her own were wet with tears.

Rima and Judd were late in arriving. For a while Jasmine thought they were not coming to the Fair, but she found some friends they had known in the past and who had seen their verdo in the Keswick area, and by the next day they had taken up their usual position, and Judd was offering leather goods for sale.

Miall had forbidden Jasmine to go and see her former foster-parents. Trading was slow with the horses and he had not been drinking so much because he did not want Nevin to deal behind his back if he drank himself into a stupid state. So, for a few days, Jasmine kept to their own caravan. She still wanted her dagger but Lanny had denied all knowledge of it and said that it must have been thrown on the fire with the soiled rags from the time poor Sarah had lost her life. Jasmine had said no more but pointedly remarked to Miall that his luck seemed to be leaving him.

It did not help to see Jake Reid looking so pleased with

himself, having had fine pickings. He was a skilled pick-pocket and only took enough from each of his victims to cause annoyance and not wholesale furore. And his total at the end of the day was very satisfactory.

Jasmine had caught sight of old Rima watching her dancing. For a brief moment their eyes met and Jasmine had seen the old woman turning away with puckered lips. She had hardened her own heart against them, now that the memory of Judd's treachery to her had become strong again. But the sight of Rima had brought other, more tender memories, and the remembrance of the gypsy woman's love for her was sweet. Who loved her now? Miall professed love for her, but often it seemed that he was more determined to lay claim to her as a possession rather than as the woman he loved.

The Birches did not love their women, except as assets to work for them and to provide for their comfort. If Nevin had grieved for Sarah, he had done so in private; now, if it had not been for baby Joe, it seemed as though the Irish girl had never existed or been part of their family. Nevin satisfied himself with other women and scarcely noticed the child.

Jasmine handed Miall a reasonable sum from her dancing and changed into one of her new gowns. She hesitated over which one, then decided to wear one and take the other to show Rima, who would no doubt appreciate her sewing since she had been a slow and careless pupil at one time.

'I'm going to see Rima and Judd,' she informed Miall calmly. 'The work is done and I will be back to make a meal at the usual time.'

'You will not put a foot over the door of their verdo,' he said harshly. 'You don't belong to them any more. You're a Birch now.'

'They brought me up. I will go and see them. If you try to stop me, I won't dance another step and then you'll lose money. Whatever you do to me, you cannot make me dance for you.'

Miall's hand had risen to slap her, but she did not move away.

'I have no herbs to heal a bruise and it would show when I dance. Will they throw money to a poor ill-used gypsy woman? No, they applaud a woman who looks pleasing, as you know. You used to watch me yourself.'

'Keep your word then,' he told her. 'Be back for our meal, not a second late.'

Rima was tidying their verdo and Judd taking stock of his leather goods and a few wicker baskets which he had learned to make. He stared at Jasmine as though he had never seen her before, but after a moment, Rima folded her in her arms.

'I'm so glad to see you, daughter,' she whispered.

'Get away from here,' said Judd. 'You don't belong here now.'

He thought about the coins which had been paid for her, and which had been mainly spent on so much drink that for a while he had been unfit to work. Finally, near-starvation had once again driven him into his old routine and they had climbed back to a tolerable life, but his small mind blamed Jasmine for his troubles, and he was fearful that the noble lord who had bought her might return again and demand his money back, now that she had been found married to a gypsy.

'I want to talk to Rima,' she said. 'Miall says I can stay until we have to eat. Oh Rima, I'm so glad to see you again.'

Her hand slipped under the folds of her gown and she found a few coins which she pressed into the old

woman's hand, then turned to Judd.

'I was stupid enough to bring something for you as well,' she said, 'but you would throw me out, and I see that you don't need them.'

His eyes were greedy as usual, but she saw that drink had ravaged his face and that his hands trembled, so she took pity on him and gave him the coins.

'Don't waste the money,' she said, knowing the remark to be useless.

'I look after most of it now,' Rima told her. 'I've kept some of what we were given.'

'When you sold me,' Jasmine said bitterly.

'No . . . not then,' said Rima mysteriously. A silent signal had flashed between her and Judd, and he shook his head.

'When?' asked Jasmine, and, receiving no answer, her suspicion grew. 'Have you seen the master again?'

Rima stared at her stolidly. 'Maybe it's better that you go back to your *rom*,' she said. 'You were sold to the gentleman and you've run away from him and married Miall Birch, when Judd denied the match. You cannot blame the gentleman for being angry.'

'How do you know he's angry?' Jasmine pursued.

'Because we've seen him. He sent out his servants to look for us and we were forced to stay at Keswick until he came to talk to us.'

Jasmine's heart began to pound so that it almost leapt from her breast.

'He's been to see you? Then . . . then he is well again?'

'He looks a poor man compared with the fine gentleman who bought you, but he is well. What did you do to him, Jasmine? Sometimes, although I have loved you like a daughter, I am glad that you are not my own child. Sometimes I think that the wrong which Judd did when he

robbed that coach put ill luck and evil into you.'

'What coach?' asked Jasmine. 'You would never tell me about my real parents.'

'Hold your tongue, woman,' Judd said to Rima, then turned to Jasmine. 'And you get out of here. You bring us nothing but trouble.'

'I won't go until I have heard why the master came to see you.'

Again there was silence, and Judd's small eyes gleamed.

'We needn't tell you anything, and in any case, your fine gentleman will be coming to look for his own. He knows you married Miall Birch, but you were bonded to him. What will he do about that?'

Jasmine said nothing. The master already knew she was married to Miall. He could not have forgotten the long journey from France, and his lucid moments when she managed to talk to him. Suddenly a cold hard lump began to dissolve a little and there was lightening of her spirits. She was glad that he was well again, but she did not understand why he should have sought out Judd and Rima. Surely he would have forgotten her now that she was a gypsy wife? He no longer needed a dancing girl.

She sighed and sat down.

'Never mind the master. I served him well and he gave me my freedom. Now I just want news.'

She asked about the past year, what they had done and where they had travelled. After a while Rima began to talk more readily and even Judd broke in with a word or two of news. It occurred to Jasmine that they had missed her after all, and that a strong part of them still cared about her.

She showed Rima her dresses and described the lovely dancing dress that she had worn when she visited France.

Soon she was telling them about her journey there, and the Leghs became spellbound as they heard about the great turmoil and terror which had reigned there whilst Jasmine and her companions travelled through the midst of the Revolution.

'You were in mortal danger, daughter,' said Rima, awed. 'And Miall Birch travelled to find you there?'

'He did.'

'Then he deserved you,' Judd nodded sagely. 'I should not have denied you to him. That was wrong, and took my luck.'

'We've had bad luck ever since,' Rima agreed, 'but it might be better now since the noble gentleman returned.'

Suddenly the door of the caravan flew open. Miall stood there swaying, and Jasmine saw immediately that he was well gone in drink.

'Come out of there, bitch!' he yelled. 'You're no wife to me. You . . . you neglect me.'

A small crowd had gathered round him. Jasmine looked at them with a flushed face and would have shut the door but Miall insisted that it stay open.

'Let them listen!' he bawled. 'Let everybody listen! You're coming with me.' He hit her a reeling blow on the cheek. 'Now see what I have done for you. See! This is what you want, isn't it?'

The blow had almost blinded Jasmine and her head raged with pain, but as her vision began to clear she saw that he was brandishing her jewelled dagger. All pain was swept away before the joy of seeing it again. The dagger had given her an inner security which she had not possessed for months, and she had desperately wanted it returned.

'Miall!' she cried, then screamed as Judd leapt forward to take the dagger from the drunken man. His immediate

thought had been that Miall intended to use it on Jasmine and from somewhere inside him there arose a fierce desire to protect the girl. In Judd's queer twisted nature there was a streak of love for the girl he had brought up as his own daughter. He had been surprised at how much he had missed her and a great deal of his drinking with the money he had received for her had been born out of the loss he had felt when she had gone.

He hated himself for what he had done, but he had also loved himself all his life and confusion had further twisted him until his only rest was in the oblivion which drink had brought. But Rima had saved him and he had gradually picked up the threads of his life again. The past hour had given him an inward glow of happiness as he listened once again to Jasmine's clear, bell-like voice and the fascinating tales she had to tell.

Then Miall had burst in like a devil out of Hell and was threatening to destroy the girl. Judd was still a strong, sinewy man, and he was sober; although the older man, he therefore had some advantage over Miall. For a while the two men grappled with one another at the door of the caravan whilst the onlookers cheered and cat-called.

Jasmine shouted for them to stop but Rima held her when she would have leapt forward to separate them.

'No, he has a dagger,' cried Rima. 'He will do you an injury.'

'No he won't. The dagger is mine. Let me go, Rima.'

Then suddenly it was all over. Miall's foot slipped at the door of the caravan and he fell heavily to the ground. As he fell he gave a queer strangled scream.

Judd paused, panting, in the doorway.

'I always knew he had bad in him, Jasmine,' he said, 'and it comes out in the drink. His father was just the same. Joe Birch was an evil man in his drink.'

But Jasmine had rushed past him and bent down to raise Miall's head as she turned him over. She gave a sudden horrified scream. The dagger had pierced his chest, and a moment later the warm blood was dribbling from his mouth.

'He has fallen on the dagger,' she whispered, then shouted to Judd. 'He has fallen on the dagger, Judd. He . . . he's wounded. Miall is wounded badly, Judd.'

Judd paused, bewildered, then his eyes grew hot with anger.

'What's this, Jasmine? Are you up to your tricks again? I was forgetting that you're the wild one when you like. And now you're trying to frighten me.'

'Oh God,' Rima was whispering. 'It's the truth she speaks, Judd.'

He had knelt down beside Miall and now he sprang back.

'It was an accident,' he cried. 'I didn't strike him with the dagger. He must have fallen onto it. It was an accident . . . You all saw that, didn't you?'

Jasmine sat on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably as the crowd gathered around. She remembered that Rima gave her something to drink, then the Birches were there, shouting that she was a murderess, with Lanny saying she had been able to see this end all along. They would have killed her except that the crowd was in her favour and insisted it was an accident.

Then she was being questioned by law officers, and an inquiry was held even if it turned out to be a sketchy affair. One gypsy killing another was a commonplace affair and there were plenty of witnesses to say that this gypsy had fallen onto his dagger.

Only the Birches still refused to believe it and Jasmine had to seek refuge with Rima and Judd, in fear of her life.

Lanny insisted that she had known Jasmine would kill Miall if she returned the dagger to her; she could *pen baji*, she said.

Jasmine shivered when she looked into Lanny's hate-filled eyes. She had not loved Miall, but he was all she had had and she would never have wished evil on him. Yet she had threatened him with evil if he took her dagger, and he had died trying to return it to her.

Old Nan Birch prophesied that it would be the death of Joe, but Joe lived on. Finally the Birches departed with the other gypsies, after the authorities had been satisfied; they had to be content with seizing Jasmine's *verdo* and all the possessions she had so painstakingly collected. She now possessed only two dresses and a small hoard of coins which she kept on her person. But she had no desire to save her possessions. And she wanted nothing more to do with the Birches; she knew that their hatred of her would burn for as long as they could tell the tale.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jasmine remained with Judd and Rima, who stayed on at Appleby after the last verdo had rumbled away and there was only the mess left for the luckless townspeople to tidy up for another year. She had expected that she could live with her foster-parents once again, but soon she realized that entwined with their love for her was a genuine fear of her which reached back to the circumstances under which she had been found.

She knew now that she had been travelling in a coach which had overturned near Canterbury, and that Judd and Rima had found her wandering there. The man and woman in the coach had both died in the accident. Jasmine's vague mental images, which she had thought to be dreams, she now knew to be actual memories of her nightmarish experience.

But the secret which Rima and Judd kept from her was that Judd had been walking home to their camp in a drunken stupor and had caused the horses to bolt. The accident had sobered him and when he saw that the occupants of the coach were beyond help but for the child, he had taken the little one home to Rima, then had gone back to help himself to any valuables he could find.

After that his luck had been bad and he had blamed the child, though Rima had begun to love the little girl who

could lisp 'Jasmine'. Rima had blamed the robbing of dead people for Judd's ill luck and she had tried to purify the verdo by mixing up herbal concoctions and sprinkling them round all four corners of the verdo whilst chanting incantations.

Two years later Judd was put in prison, having been sent by Rima to buy material for a dress for Jasmine, but having decided to steal it instead. Again he had blamed Jasmine, but Rima would have none of it. The child was innocent, Rima insisted; she could not destroy their luck.

But now Jasmine found that Judd and Rima were looking at her with fear and even repulsion. She had been too upset by Miall's sudden violent death to trouble about her surroundings. The verdo had always been her haven as far as she could remember and she took its sanctuary for granted.

The dagger had been returned to her but this time she could not bear to touch it. She remembered how she had threatened Miall that if he stole it from her, he would die for the deed. Always she could hear again the angry words which she had hurled at him, and she felt as though she had killed him with her own hands. She had not loved him, and had even loathed him at times, but they had also shared moments of love and intimacy so that she felt as though part of her had been severed and the wound lay raw and bleeding.

'When do we go on our way?' she asked Judd. 'Are you heading towards the west? I . . . I cannot dance for you, Judd, but I will beg to earn my pennies. My heart is too heavy for dancing.'

She hated begging, but it was better than stealing and she had to earn her bread somehow. She would not be a burden to them.

Rima and Judd exchanged glances, then formed a solid

barrier against her. Now their gypsy blood mingled and stood firm and she was equally firmly placed on the other side of the fence, amidst the gaujos. She was bad luck for them. Rima acknowledged this to be so. They should never have taken her when she was a child. She had longed for a child, and Judd had brought her the little girl, but he should have left her alone. Someone would have found the coach and returned the child to her rightful people, or she would have been looked after by her own kind if all her people were dead. She would have been brought up a gaujo child and her luck would not have wreaked vengeance on their own.

‘You will have to go back to the Birches, Jasmine,’ said Judd. ‘You can travel back towards Richmond. They go east again. They are your people now.’

She gazed at him horrified. ‘I . . . I cannot go to the Birches. I hate them and they hate me. They would kill me because they blame me for Miall’s death. I want to stay with you. I’ll be able to dance for you one day and earn money for you again.’

She appealed to Rima, but a shutter had fallen over the gypsy woman’s eyes, and Jasmine was completely shut out.

‘Rima?’ she asked.

The older woman shook her head. ‘Go east,’ she said. ‘You married a Birch. You are a Birch now. Judd and I are moving out in the morning. They are your family and they will not kill their own, whatever they say.’

Jasmine drew a shuddering breath. She was so tired that her pride almost lay in the dust, but always there was a hard core in her which prevented her from pleading with anyone. If they did not want her, then she would manage to live her own life.

But how? Somewhere in her a child cried out once

again as the ruins of her life and security lay about her in broken wreckage and dead faces. Jasmine fought hard against becoming that child again, as she quietly rolled up her one other dress. Hesitating, she also decided to keep the dagger. It had not been used in anger; it had only killed Miall by accident, so there was no real evil hanging over it. It would protect her, and if she could not find food, she could always sell it for money.

‘Good luck go with you,’ she said to Rima and Judd.

‘And to you, daughter,’ said Rima automatically.

‘I am not your daughter,’ said Jasmine, her voice tight with emotion. The lines around Rima’s mouth crumpled, and she held the girl to her.

‘Good luck go with you,’ she whispered. ‘Why not go back to your master? You could be a servant in his house, and he would feed you.’

Pride swelled in Jasmine even though she nodded non-committally to satisfy Rima. She would never grovel to the master, or to anyone else. She was herself, and even if she was forced to beg her bread for a week or two, she would find ways of earning it again honestly.

‘I will never steal,’ she vowed inwardly, ‘and I will never sell my body. I am Jasmine and no one can touch what is me.’

Courage flowed in her again and she threw back her head and smiled. Then she turned away and walked towards the town of Appleby. She would move west into the mountains which she had always loved, but first of all she would beg a few pennies to buy bread and other small necessities for her journey.

Now that the gypsies had gone, the ordinary business of the small town was once again in full swing, but it was very

soon made clear to Jasmine that the gypsies were only tolerated year by year because of the large numbers which gathered there and for the money they spent. Their music, romance and glitter was exciting for a day or two, but their noise and mess, brawls and fights were soon wearisome to the people who lived there and they had no love for their colourful visitors—or so it seemed to the girl.

Jasmine wondered if she might get work helping at one of the inns, but it was soon made clear to her that she was not welcome in even the meanest hovel. It was as though some townspeople were determined to clear out all evidence of gypsy habitation, and the faint odour of gypsy which clung to her skirts was not tolerable. When she grew hungry and would have bought food for herself, even that was denied her until she found a small store willing to sell her food, and to give her shelter in an outhouse.

Jasmine began to beg for her bread but the people of Appleby were not so ready now to part with their money. There was a great difference between the appeal of a small child at the Fair when a carnival atmosphere softened the hearts of those who had come to enjoy it, and a young woman who looked strong and able-bodied enough to work for a living. One or two men would have laid a hand on her, but she drew back and the fury in her eyes drove them away. She was left in no doubt as to the hazards of a journey which would take her from town to town, even if she managed to stay close to one of the many poor families who trudged the roads with their few belongings piled into a handcart, looking for work on the farms whilst their ragged children ran beside them, ill fed and unkempt.

After a time Jasmine's chant of 'Alms for the poor' had

the genuine ring of desperation and she walked along as though her body was no longer her own. Her worst nightmare that she would one day be alone and unloved had come true. She should have moved west to Penrith, she knew, whilst she had strength, but now for the first time in her life she began to know real fear. She needed strength in her limbs in order to make the journey. She was a woman on her own, and her resolution that she would not sell herself began to waver. Slowly she made her way towards the Crown Inn, knowing that if a man grabbed her arm and looked into her eyes, she might not turn away.

‘Alms for the poor,’ she whispered behind a tall thin gentleman.

Then her heart lurched and the world began to spin when he turned round and she found that she was looking into the face of the Master of Glenlacie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He seemed to be taller than ever, thought Jasmine, and there were marks of suffering about his mouth. His face was paler than she remembered, but she could see evidence of his returning strength in the upright carriage of his body and the grace of his movements.

For a long time they stared silently at one another and she became conscious of her dishevelled appearance and the weakness in herself.

'Ah, Jasmine,' he said. 'I must say you're devilish hard to find. I've had men out following the gypsies this past week, and only returned this morning when the Leghs informed us that you might still be in this vicinity. Come, let's go inside.'

His tone had been so matter-of-fact that she almost took his hand, but a moment later she was hanging back.

'No . . . no . . . I cannot come with you to the Crown Inn. They . . . they don't care to harbour gypsies.'

'What's this?' His eyebrows shot up. 'Now don't start your usual arguments. I have much to say to you that cannot be said in the street. I've got my usual room booked at the Crown Inn and I'm sure the landlord will give us a private room where we can talk. And if you aren't hungry, then I am. I shall order a meal for two, and if you cannot eat then you can sit and watch me make a good repast.'

Her dry tongue ran over her lips as she walked beside

him and she would have staggered if he had not caught hold of her arm. The landlord's lip curled when he saw that the Master of Glenlacie had brought the gypsy girl into his inn, but Elliott's face became hard as granite when he gave his orders. He wished for a private room, and ordered food to be brought, after which he would again consult with the landlord and his wife.

Elliott spoke very little until after they had finished their meal. At first Jasmine had eaten timidly, then as the good rich soup touched her empty stomach, she began to eat ravenously until he stopped her.

'Enough for now. You must leave room for the supper we will share. I don't want you groaning with an upset belly so that I have to go through all the trouble of making you well again. You're monstrous quiet, too, and that isn't like you. I'm apprehensive of what will come, when that tongue of yours begins to wag again.'

'I . . . I don't know what to say—except that I'm glad to see you well,' she said formally, and his smile faded a little.

'I owe you my life, Jasmine—you and the gypsy fellow you married.'

'Miall.'

'I had not forgotten his name.'

'He is dead,' said Jasmine flatly.

'I know.'

'He . . . he fell onto André's dagger and it killed him.'

Suddenly she was weeping again, whilst Elliott poured her a glass of wine and held it to her lips. He took her in his arms to comfort her. At last he stood back from her, cupping her chin in his fingers in order to gaze into her eyes.

'Did he mean that much to you?'

She was shaking her head. 'He was all I had

and . . . and it happened so suddenly.'

'Then haven't you wept enough tears? For God's sake, Jasmine, must I always have to clean you up? Your dress is bedraggled, your hair needs to be combed and most of all you need a bath.'

Jasmine's tears vanished as the familiar spark of anger began to grow. She had cried out all her tears for Miall and the ones she now shed were more for herself than anything else; for once she had been pitying herself. But self-pity soon vanished in the anger she felt against Elliott for his lack of understanding.

'You'd need a bath, too,' she cried, 'if you had trudged the streets looking for away to earn an honest living—'

'Honest?'

'Yes, honest!' she cried, now fully enraged. 'I had made a pledge to myself, and I kept it, that I would not steal or . . . or sell myself. And I have not. But there are no warm scented baths at the side of a dirty road, and no silk garments hanging from the trees. You . . . you . . .'

He was laughing softly. 'That's my Jasmine,' he said. 'I'm sorry to hear about your husband, my dear, and I'm sure you've been sorrowing for him, but it has not broken your spirit. You are still the same bad-tempered girl I bought a year ago.'

'You gave me my freedom, if I completed the mission for you.'

His eyes sobered. 'I know. You worked well for me. We did all that I set out to do.'

'Except to bring back Anne-Marie.'

'Except for that.'

'So you were denied your bride.'

He looked at her narrowly. 'Perhaps not. Have you heard that poor Thomas Muir went on trial? He got fourteen years in Botany Bay, accused of setting up a

revolution in Scotland like the one we saw in France.'

She shivered. 'That was horrible. It still gives me nightmares.'

Again he looked at her thoughtfully. 'Ah, those nightmares! Now, if you've eaten sufficient food, even if it was not enough for my hungry sparrow, I shall leave you in the hands of the landlord's wife, who will prepare a hot bath for you. Wash your hair, child. I want to see those soft curls again. I have a garment for you to wear until I get back with something more decent than those rags which barely cover you.'

Jasmine looked down and flushed when she saw that the front of her gown had come loose from her stitching and that her breast was pressing against it.

'I made it myself,' she protested.

'I can see that. You were never much of a seamstress, my Jasmine. You are—'

'What?'

'A termagent, that's what,' he laughed. 'I have business to do and I want you to wait for me here. I warn you that if you run away, I shall pull the kingdom apart to find you again, so you will just make trouble for yourself. There are things to be cleared between us. Besides—' he clinked the coins in his pocket—'you might as well collect your gold now that you have your hands on me once again.'

He came to kiss her lightly, then made for the door, where he turned to look at her, a teasing light in his eyes. 'I would kiss you again if you did not stink.'

Her eyes sparkled with rage and mortification. 'I'm not *asking* you to kiss me! Keep away from me!'

Again he laughed happily and called the landlady, speaking to her quickly outside the door.

'Yes sir, I'll see to it,' Jasmine heard the woman say. 'Right away, sir.'

'She will light a fire for you,' said Elliott, putting his head round the door. 'The day has gone dull and it grows cool when the sun is absent. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

The landlord's wife was a fat motherly woman who looked at Jasmine silently when she first brought the bath, and buckets of hot water, then carried in a plain white shift for her to wear. It was so like the previous occasion that Jasmine began to feel the months dropping away. She could almost believe that she was back in Glenlacie with Meg to care for her, and she luxuriated in the hot scented water and washed the dust out of her long hair which glowed like rich copper in the firelight.

The landlady brought her a comb and she sat in front of the fire combing her hair until the tangles were removed and it began to dry. She felt more and more like the girl who had run along the broad stone corridors at Glenlacie—but that was dangerous, thought Jasmine, as warning bells began to sound. She had hardened herself into gypsy life and now the master had come along to break through her protective shell. Yet all too soon he would be gone again, out of her life, and she would be more vulnerable than ever to its harsh rigours and to the gargantuan task of keeping herself alive each day. Happiness was a sweet blossom, she reflected, always out of reach.

The warmth of the fire and the soothing richness of her warm bath had made Jasmine tired, and she slept curled up in a chair, even though the afternoon was still young.

Then suddenly Elliott had returned and was ushering a bright little woman into the room, and helping her to carry a large box.

'Here is the lady,' he was saying to her. 'Do you think you can do something for her, ma'am?'

'Oh yes sir, I'm sure the gown will fit. It was for Miss

Dora from Arnott Hall but she changed her mind about the colour and the gown was left on my hands. I'll be glad to be rid of it, sir.'

Jasmine stared in wonder as a gown of soft powder blue silk was lifted from the box. It was the loveliest gown she had ever seen, but it was completely impractical for a gypsy girl, even for dancing.

'I cannot wear that,' she cried.

'You have no choice,' said Elliott smoothly. 'Your old gown was consumed in the fire and you cannot stay in this room for ever more. This is the only gown Miss Daly here can supply at such short notice. She has brought you some of the other *fal-de-lals* which women wear. I'll leave you in her capable hands, Jasmine, and I want no tantrums. Now I wish to have a word with the landlord and his wife. There are still some arrangements I must make.'

Jasmine stood in front of the fire whilst the small woman briskly unpacked her box.

'I'm sorry there is so little choice, ma'am,' she said, 'and I'm sure you must regret the sad loss of your own gowns in the fire . . .'

'So *that*'s what Elliott had told her!

' . . . but these might be quite comfortable.'

Swiftly she slipped a rose-scented chemise over Jasmine's head, then began to lace her into a corset.

'Not that!' the girl said sharply.

'But ma'am, every lady—'

'I . . . I have not been well,' said Jasmine desperately. Her young free body had never been constricted and she would feel imprisoned by this evil-looking garment. 'I cannot wear such a thing.'

'Oh very well,' the woman said with a slight sniff, and began to put on petticoats, then the lovely silk dress which felt like a whisper of thistledown against Jasmine's skin.

There was a soft cashmere shawl to go with the dress and the little woman, all smiles again when she saw the result of her handiwork, stepped back admiringly.

‘You are a very beautiful young lady,’ she said. ‘I only wish Miss Dora could see the gown now. It never did look like that on her.’

Jasmine looked down at herself. Her feet were still bare, but the woman produced soft slippers; they were a little too big, but that was welcome to her tired feet. She had a mental vision of herself trying to beg bread wearing this dress and she smiled ruefully. She would have to spend some of the gold Elliott had promised her on material for another gypsy dress, but for a few hours it was nice to pretend.

The seamstress departed and soon Elliott was back in the room. His step faltered as he walked in the door, and she could see the light in his eyes again as he looked at her. He wanted to make her his mistress once more. She had suspected that all along. She would be protected for a little while, but sooner or later she would have to live her own life again, when he tired of her or found himself a wife. Then she would be older and less able to adapt. Now, after her hunger had been satisfied and her body cleansed, she felt capable of looking after herself once more.

And as for that other hunger . . .

Jasmine tried to control herself as Elliott walked slowly towards her, then took her into his arms. She could smell the faintly perfumed male smell of him which had been so familiar to her, and this time his kiss was no light touching of the lips, but a passionate hunger.

‘By God, Jasmine, I have missed you,’ he said huskily. ‘It is time we were wed, then you will not slip through my fingers so easily.’

'Wed!' she cried.

'Aye, my dear. The parson is coming at four, and the landlord and his wife will be our witnesses. I have all the arrangements made.'

'You would wed a gypsy?' she cried.

'I would wed Jasmine,' he said, sitting down on a chair and pulling her onto his knee. 'I shall have no other but my Jasmine. You belong to me.'

She stared at him. His tone was teasing, as usual, but there was a light in his eyes which she had not seen before. Almost she relaxed against him, but fear grew in her. He could be amusing himself; and if she were left on her own again after surrendering her will to his, her life would indeed be intolerable. She must hold herself strong and depend only on herself.

'It has troubled you, has it not, little one that you do not remember your childhood?' Elliott went on. 'Are your dreams still nightmares?'

She nodded. The nightmares still came to haunt her.

'I tried to find out more on your behalf, about that house in France and about the accident, from Judd . . .'

'Accident?'

'A coach was overturned near Canterbury and a man and woman were killed. The gentleman was James Montgomery of London and Winchester, and the lady Jacqueline Vinsonnaud Montgomery. They had a child called Agnes Marie Jessamée. That much I have discovered.'

Jasmine's eyes grew round with wonder. 'Then . . . then . . .' she began, but Elliott slowly shook his head.

'I cannot establish any more for you, my little love, though I know it would mean a great deal to you. You see, Judd Legh found the little girl—you, my own—wandering in a country lane almost a quarter of a mile from the

coach. You *could* have wandered from that coach, or from a nearby town—or anywhere. We shall never know now. Is it not good enough for you to be my wife?’

‘Anne-Marie was going to be your bride.’

There was still jealousy in her head and still the need for reassurance. She had to convince herself that he truly wanted to wed her.

‘You never knew Anne-Marie,’ he was saying. ‘You always talked about her as though she were a painted doll, but I tell you she was more of a gypsy than you. She was a wild girl, of warm flesh and blood; she would have loved you, and you her. I never knew anyone who did not love Anne-Marie. I promised to marry her when she was still a child, and I a grown man. But I would have kept that promise as best I could and married her even though I had fallen in love with you. It was a matter of honour.’

‘I did not hear this talk of honour when we left Castillon-Cazals behind, and travelled north again.’

‘With Anne-Marie so newly dead? And the Comte and Comtesse who had been parents to my sister and me?’

‘Ah . . . your sister!’ cried Jasmine, a glitter of anger again in her eyes. ‘Your sister! What does *she* say to this match? She would not even let me see you. She drove Miall and me from Glenlacie and we could have starved had not André given me two gold pieces, and his dagger.’ Her eyes grew solemn. ‘Poor Miall. He was killed by that dagger. I was a gypsy girl then and a gypsy wife, living in a stinking verdo with other gypsies who stole and spied and lied to one another, but whose sense of honour and decency you could never understand because yours is so different. There is much in me which still belongs to that life. Oh, Elliott, are you certain in your heart that you want me for your wife?’

She had risen to her feet, all her beauty enhanced by the

rich silk of her gown and the rippling shining hair which fell about her shoulders. Elliott's face had sobered at her words, but now a slow smile began to spread over his dark stern face.

'To me you will always be Jasmine, my own,' he said gently. 'You are a nasty, bad-tempered, dirty termagent who has to be watched at every turn. You are also soft and sweet and delightful to me in all ways and I have such a need for you that I cannot wait for any preacher.'

He moved towards her and she backed away.

'Stop, Elliott,' she cried, 'or you will spoil my wedding dress. You are the same as always, confident of your own desires, and careless of me. You are a beast and . . . why are you laughing?'

'You said I would spoil your wedding dress. That was a slip of the tongue, my wild poppy. You should be married in scarlet, not blue! All the fine clothes in the world will not make a lady of you. You are still just my gypsy girl that is the girl I am going to marry. Now, I want no more argument because I think our priest has arrived, and the landlord and his wife will be our witnesses. Stand up, my dear, and make your vows well, and know that if you ever break them, I shall see to it that you will pay with your life. You shall never belong to another man.'

He dragged her by the hand and she came to stand beside him meekly as the priest, followed by the landlord and his lady, came into the room. Then, as though in a dream, she began to hear the priest performing the marriage rites over them and asking them to make their vows. Jasmine made hers almost in a whisper. She had no voice left. But it was enough and soon the landlord and his wife were bringing in food and wine for their celebrations. Elliott's servants had returned and were asked to join in the celebrations. The wine began to flow freely, though

Jasmine saw that her new husband remained abstemious and also supervised her own food and drink. Then, at a reasonable hour, his hand was suddenly on her arm.

'The best room has been prepared for us, my flower,' he whispered. 'Now we must say goodnight to our guests and retire.'

She climbed the stairs silently beside him. He had said he was perfectly capable of playing maid to his wife, but Jasmine's teeth chattered with cold, even though the night air of summer warmed their bedroom. She flinched as Elliott began to undo the many hooks of her dress.

'What ails you?' he asked, suddenly angry. 'You act like a virgin, when we both know I took your maidenhead a year ago. Since then . . .'

'Since then there has been no other except Miall.'

'I believe you,' he nodded. 'But now you are *my* wife, so let's get this fashionable gown off your back. I declare I like the gypsy rags better because they could be wrenched away in a flash. Stand still whilst I undo these buttons.'

Jasmine looked at the bed which was waiting for them and memories crowded in. She could see Lachie lying against the door and the man who had bought her for gold standing at the window whilst she occupied the bed on her own. She felt as though he had bought her all over again, with his promises to make a lady of her and to find her a family who would turn her into a noble woman. What would Lady Anne say to that? And André?

'Why did you marry me here?' she asked. 'Why did you not take me home to Glenlacie? Does your sister and André not approve?'

He paused in his labours.

'Anne has returned to Greenlaw and André has bought himself a small property with the money he received for the Crystal Heart. Now he breeds horses, and I've no

doubt he will find a nice little filly for himself and settle down to married life. Now be quiet and hold still. Why must that stupid woman make so many hooks and eyes? I declare you are as hard to find as a sweet nut in a flint-like shell. Besides, my fingers grow clumsy with impatience. Reach your own fingers round and give me some help.'

Jasmine reached round half-hearted, and he suddenly dropped his hands and pulled her round roughly.

'Can it be that you have no taste for me now?' he asked, the brittle note of anger beginning to ring. 'Can it be that the gypsy was more to your taste? Had he refinements which I lack?'

She did not answer. He began to tear off her clothes, first the dress, then the petticoats and chemise.

'I cannot forget that you bought me,' she said, 'and used me! And now you tell me you love me and have married me because you are a gentleman and cannot take the honour of a lady, even if you can take the honour of a gypsy because she has none. How can I know you love me for myself?'

'Be quiet,' he hissed and finished pulling off his own clothes so that she could see he was filled with desire for her and could wait no longer. Still chilled by her doubts, Jasmine lay cold and stiff, until the anger had left him and his satisfaction was achieved.

He raised himself on one elbow and looked down on her, and in spite of herself, her hand rose to stroke the ugly wound which had almost taken his life. The hair had now grown and she had to reach up to touch the head wound which had played such havoc with his memory.

'You still cannot believe me,' he said, and she looked up at him, her eyes troubled.

'It is like another world, your world.'

'Ours,' he corrected.

‘And I can never be sure that you have truly married me for love of me, myself. I want only to be loved and married for myself, Elliott.’

‘And you loved your gypsy better because he married you.’

She shook her head. ‘Sometimes I hated him,’ she whispered. ‘I never loved him as . . . as I loved you.’

He looked deeply into her eyes, then he rose and fumbled in the old familiar leather belt which he had unstrapped from around his waist. Then he walked back over to the bed and handed her a small box. The lid flew open and she gasped with amazement when she looked at its contents. There, blazing in all its glory, was the beautiful diamond, the Crystal Heart. It had been fashioned into a pendant and hung on a gold chain.

‘André’s Crystal Heart,’ she breathed.

‘André’s no longer. I told you he had sold it to buy himself property and to give him a new career in breeding horses. Well, he sold the diamond to me.’

‘To you!’

‘No, my darling wife. To *you*. See. Look what it says on the box.’

She looked at the lovely box and saw that a name had been engraved there. It was her own—Jasmine.

Tears stung her eyes as Elliott hung the beautiful diamond round her neck. She was well aware of its great value.

‘I could only give it to you when you became my wife,’ he told her. ‘It is all yours, my darling, but I would hope it might become part of our family treasures and will pass on some day to the wife of our first-born son, or to our daughter if we have no sons. It is a famous diamond, and I shall tell you its history one day when we are not so well occupied.’

‘Well occupied?’

His eyebrows quirked, and she blushed then laughed with sheer joy as she suddenly leapt from the bed and began to dance round the room.

Elliott lay enchanted and spellbound as, snapping her fingers, she danced only for him and he saw the grace and beauty of her splendid body as she twisted and turned, then grew wild in her movements so that the Crystal Heart shone with blazing brilliance as it flashed and sparkled on her neck. Elliott knew that she was dancing for him alone, and that from now on she would dance for no one else.

Finally she sank to the floor, then came back to him exhausted, but with her eyes again sparkling like emeralds more beautiful even than the Crystal Heart.

This time her arms crept round his neck and this time there was no inhibition in their love-making. Jasmine had never known such ecstasy.

‘Tomorrow we will leave for our home, my heart,’ he told her softly. ‘Tomorrow and all our tomorrows.’

But already Jasmine, Mistress of Glenlacie, was asleep.